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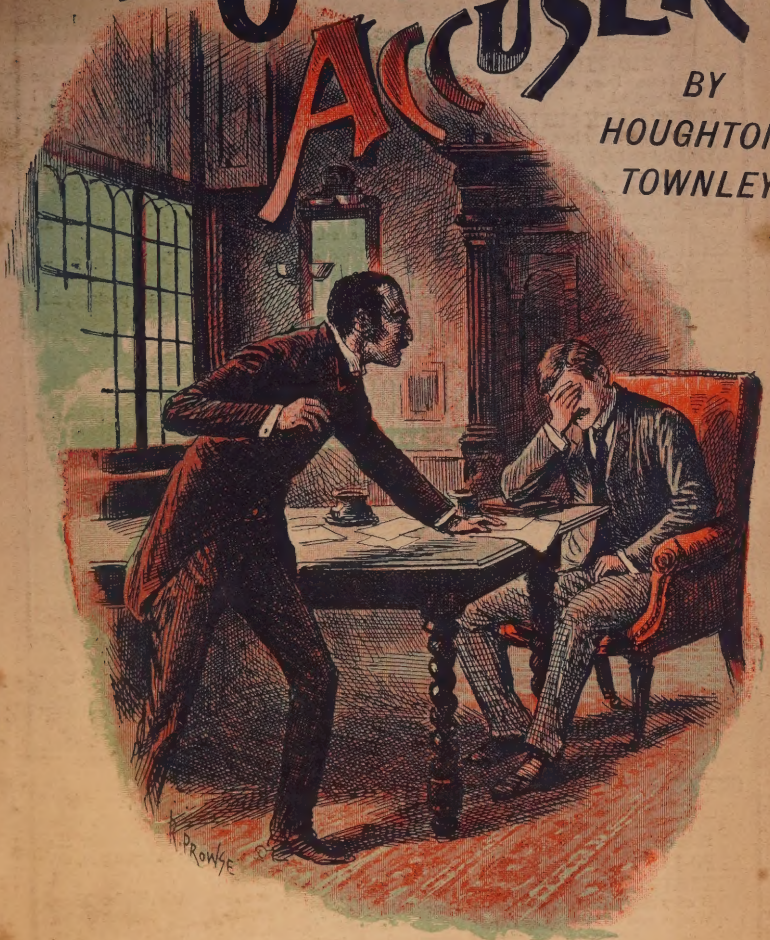

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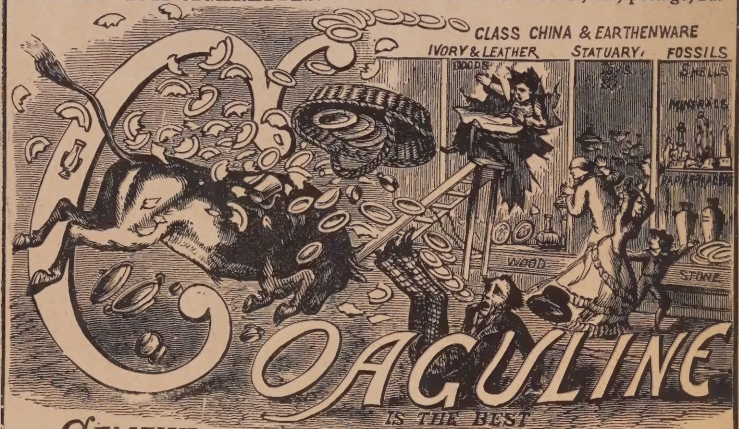

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HIS OWN ACCUSER.

CHAPTER I.

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD—HIS OWN ACCUSER.

The grey dawn is breaking gently over a lonely field on a Somersetshire farm—breaking slowly through a heavy September mist.

In the field, as the purple dawn penetrates the cold grey clouds, a long, straggling footpath opens upon the view leading away up the slope till it is lost in the feathery mist which envelopes the still and silent wold.

In the middle of the field lie the bodies of two men—both young and handsome—stretched out athwart the footpath as though in death.

Bend over and look at them well. Note that near each lies a gun. One man clutches the stock of his weapon. The other gun has fallen from its owner's hand, never to be clasped again.

Look again. Look very closely at the two men. One, whose gun has fallen from his hand, lies to the left, prone upon his face—dead. See how the diamond dew glistens upon his ice-cold face and upon his glossy hair: he must have been dead some time.

There is no dew upon the hands of the prostrate man at the right, though it clings in diamonds on his rippling hair. He lies outstretched upon his back as one who has fallen asleep.

His face, which is turned upwards to the sky, has not the

grey-green pallor of death. There is a red flush on his cheeks, and he breathes, for he is not dead, merely sleeping off the stupor of a pernicious drug.

Never before has Phil Raynor slept like that—a sleep so heavy, so stupefying. It would be unfair to say he is drunk, for there never lived a more temperate man. He has been dosed with a drug which some call alcohol and others poison.

See, he moves!

His eyes open and he notices the mist-filled sky. Then he rubs his eyes with his cold, benumbed hand; stretches out and clutches the cold, wet grass; his limbs are cold, the air he breathes is cold.

Slowly he raises himself upon his hands, and looks at the ground beneath and the pall of mist around him, but he does not see the dead man behind him yet. He can scarcely hold up his head for the dull, leaden pain which weighs it down and throbs all over him.

"What—what is this?" is his first incoherent thought. Then gradually the situation dawns upon him.

"It is morning—morning, and—last night? I have not been home since—since the dinner last night at the "Stag." My head, oh, how it whirls! How did I come here?"

Then the painful truth dawns upon him with a shock that sends a blush tingling through him. "I must have been drunk! May Heaven forgive me! I remember now.

"I remember they were all standing on chairs round the table in the big dining-room at the "Stag," drinking health and long life to me and Pauline in bumpers of champagne, cheering with shouts like thunder, while the room was whirling round, and—and Eddie, my good friend Eddie, was there telling me to come home with him, and I would not.

"I remember—yes, I struck him in the face. I felt a fury in me like madness—and he called me a fool—and I snatched up my gun and—they took it away from me, and laughed—and I felt the fury of hell within me, and everything was confused, I swore I would shoot him. But how—? Eddie!—you too!"

His eyes fell for the first time upon the prostrate form behind him, and he tried to laugh, but it was a sickly, hollow

laugh. He half crawled to where Eddie Wilde lay, and shook him gently by the arm.

"Eddie, old man, wake; we've——"

The words froze upon his lips; his eyes set with horror as his gaze fell upon the ashen face of his friend—dead, with a bullet-hole in his fair forehead, from which the purple blood had trickled in a thin streak to the damp earth.

"Dead!" he gasped. "Dead! Shot!—Shot!"

He leaped to his feet and struggled for breath. In his hand he was still grasping his gun, and now became conscious of its presence.

Awestruck, he gazed from the gun to his dead friend, from the dead back to the weapon of death, and then with a flash the real horror of the scene came upon him.

Breaking into a wild cry of agony he threw up his arms and dropped the gun as though it seared the hand which held it, and, falling upon his knees, he cried aloud to heaven:

"O God, forgive me—a murderer! Eddie, my friend—my brother Eddie, wake! Look up!"

But the still clay lay on the wet grass, and did not move. One hand lay palm upward to the sky, and in the hollow of it the heavy dew had settled, making a little pool, as it often does on things of earth that have no life.

Phil gazed in growing fear upon the silent thing, fascinated with the horror of it, and as he gazed, the light and joy of life melted out of his heart. He knelt there, bowed down over the still form, weeping for the happiness that was his before the curse of Cain descended upon him. And as he wept there rose to his lips a name, broken by sobs of agony—the name of a pure and beautiful woman he loved.

CHAPTER II.

THE DINNER AT THE "STAG" AND WHAT CAME OF IT—THE INQUEST—"WITHOUT A STAIN UPON HIS CHARACTER."

THE name of that woman was Pauline Chester, the daughter of the most popular doctor in Ilchester. No girl in Ilchester

received more homage; all the young men raved about her; and recently, to the astonishment of many, it was announced that she had given her heart to Phil Raynor.

The young men of Ilchester marvelled much at this. Phil Raynor was only the handsome, penniless son of a bankrupt, the son of a father whose life had been spent in fighting a lawsuit, and had died before the case was ended.

But following quickly on the news of Pauline's engagement came the news of the end of the Raynor lawsuit, and the accession of Phil to the Chesfield estates. Every one was glad, and congratulations poured in upon him from all sides.

Phil and his impetuous friend Eddie Wilde were prime favourites everywhere. They were inseparable chums, the crack shots of the neighbourhood, the maddest daredevils that ever risked their necks behind the hounds, and the leaders of all good sport and fun among the youth of Ilchester.

But of the two, Eddie was always the leader. It was always "Eddie and Phil," never "Phil and Eddie." Naturally every one was surprised to hear that Pauline Chester was loved by and had accepted Phil, and not Eddie.

It was decided that Phil must be fêted in honour of a triple event—his engagement to the "Rose of Ilchester," as she was called, his coming of age, and his accession to the Chesfield estates and its fine shooting—especially the shooting.

The big room at the Stag Inn was engaged and a right royal feast provided. The choice spirits at Ilchester decided, too, that they must make a day of it, and accordingly, upon the invitation of Phil, a big shooting party was arranged to shoot over the Chesfield estates upon the first day of his taking possession. The house was not yet ready for occupation, so the "Stag" at Ilchester was chosen for the dinner in the evening.

* * * * *

The guests are assembling at "the Stag" in merry mood, each carrying his gun and bringing with him a hearty English appetite. They have had a grand day's sport and are in excellent spirits.

When the dinner is served Phil is half hustled, half carried to the head of the table amid shouts of approval from the thirty or forty young men assembled.

They are not all young men though. There is one there, a pale, thin, cadaverous man of forty, who seems out of place among the rollicking young fellows at the board.

Note him well. He is Stephen Markham, solicitor, agent, and trustee of the Chesfield estates. He has been invited as a matter of form, though no one cares for his company. He is the deadhead at the feast and sits near Phil. Already he has been insulted by some facetious young man who has dropped a remark in an aggressive half whisper about "Lantern-jaws." He flashes an ugly look in the direction from which the words come; it is the look of a man who knows how to hate.

The fun grows fast and furious; the wine flows not wisely but too well, and as the evening advances the landlord glances nervously at his plate-glass mirrors and the other breakable ware in dangerous proximity to the more rowdy revellers.

Stephen Markham is the only one who does not drink freely. Phil half banteringly, half sneeringly, chides him for looking so gloomy, and annoys him by asking if the friends of his youth never taught him how to drink champagne. The deadhead darts a look of fierce resentment and tries to laugh, but in vain.

More wine, more drinking of healths, more shouting. Phil is beginning to feel he has had nearly enough.

"The toast! The toast! Pauline Chester! The Rose of Ilchester! Long life and happiness!" shouts the deep voice of Eddie Wilde above the din, as, glass in hand, he leaps upon his chair.

One or two of the more sober ones noted that his face was very pale and his strong voice husky. It must have cost him a pang to propose that toast.

The whole party follow his example and shout a wild hurrah. Somebody fills up half a tumbler of champagne for Phil. He does not notice it, neither does he see the glass of fiery *liqueur* which a foolhardy, half-drunken youth dashes into it. It is pressed into his hand and he tosses it off. The room begins to whirl, and the laughter and shouting become deafening with a noise like thunder.

After that he only has a vague recollection of what happened. But he remembers that there was a fierce altercation

about nothing, and that Eddie told him "not to be a fool, but come out and get home." He remembers, also, being convulsed with a mad rage against his friend, and snatching up his gun with an unconquerable desire to shoot him. He recalls the shout of laughter that went up as they held him back, and then—then all was a whirl, a blank. And now——

* * * * *

His horror as he gazed upon the dead body of his friend was very terrible. With the first instinct of guilt he gazed fearfully round, and saw that he was alone with the dead and the morning mists, and that near him stood no witness. Through his mind flashed all the probabilities of the future—the disgrace, the inquest, the trial, the gallows, and—Pauline.

It would kill her. She would loathe him—she who had given him her great love, and told him it was her very life. Was there no escape?

No one had seen the deed. Should he turn coward and fly? Oh, the dull throbbing of his brain—if it would only stop and let him think!

Gradually he saw the situation more clearly. There was no escape. Yet—Pauline! He could not face her with this stain upon his soul. He could not bear to think that she would know him to be a drunkard and a murderer—it was too horrible. He *must escape*.

Tremblingly he picked up the fatal weapon and his hat. With one last look of terror, and one great sob of grief, he bent over the prostrate form of his dead friend, murmuring, "Eddie! Eddie! I did not mean it, Eddie!" He put out his hand to touch the cold clay in a last farewell, but a sudden fear came over him, and he crept away and walked with hurried, unsteady steps, never looking backward till he reached his home.

He let himself in with a key, as he would have done late the night before, and no one saw him enter old Chesfield Hall. Besides, there was only an elderly housekeeper in the wandering old place. He had only formally taken possession the day before, and there were no other servants yet.

Acting more on impulse than discretion, he undressed and went to bed. He realised flight was useless; he would be passive and wait for the next to happen.

* * * * *

When the morning sun was well up a labourer on his way to work found the dead body of Edgar Wilde, shot in the head.

The news spread like wildfire, and all those who had seen him the night before marvelled, while all sorts of rumours went flying about.

Phil rose from bed at eight o'clock in the morning at the call of his housekeeper as though nothing had happened. He went about the house and the garden the ghost of his former self, striving to keep up an appearance of naturalness and innocence. But before the day was over he realised the hopelessness of his position, and prepared himself for the worst.

In the evening of that day he received a subpœna to appear at the inquest in the morning. He felt it was his death warrant.

After a sleepless night, he arrayed himself in black, and, walking like one in a trance, made his way to the Stag Inn, where the coroner and his jury were assembled.

His face was blanched to a deathly hue, and as he approached, the knot of idlers outside the inn made way for him respectfully. Some touched their hats, others whispered together.

Like a man moving to the scaffold, he entered the court-room, speaking to nobody, appearing not to notice his friends, many of whom were assembled there, and seated himself in a chair at the far end of the room. Every one respected his grief, and he was left alone.

Presently Dr. Chester enters, and leaning on his arm is his daughter Pauline. She is of medium height, with the face of an angel, a clear white skin, lustrous, thoughtful eyes, and a lithsome step. She is very grave and pale to-day, and there is no sign of the bewitching smile and the rippling laugh that lingered so long in the memory of the love-sick swain who came under the spell of her beauty.

Phil staggers to his feet. The colour comes and goes in his lips. She advances to him, and takes his cold hand.

"Oh, Phil, this is dreadful—dreadful." Tears fill her eyes as she sees the awful agony in his face. He sinks back again in his chair. "Never mind, Phil," she whispers, pressing his listless hand in hers; "you have lost *him*, but you have still got me."

"She does not know yet," he thinks, and sits bowed down, silent and resigned for the coming *dénouement*. "The blow has not fallen yet. If she could only be spared. How could he get her out of the court?"

The jury are dropping in one by one, and the coroner has arrived. He holds a short consultation in whispers with his officer, and seeing Phil (whom he knows) looking so terribly dejected, and the cynosure of all eyes, goes over and speaks to him in an undertone.

"I hope you are not upset by the idle gossip that is going about," he says; "there is no cause for anxiety. My officer tells me that the case is very plain and simple, and there is a very clear solution of the whole sad business.

His cheerful tone raises a faint look of surprise.

The court is assembled, and the hideous inquisition begins. Phil's hands clench; there is fight left in him yet. He determines to say no more than he can help. Pauline watches the working of his face, and hears nothing of the proceedings. Her tears flow freely in sympathy as she watches her lover's agony.

"How he must have loved Eddie," she thinks. "Can I do nothing to soften his grief? Does he love me like that, I wonder?"

Phil's heart is throbbing and his brain reeling. He dimly realises that witnesses are being called to give evidence of identification, and he hears the grating voice of Stephen Markham say that he is there to represent the family of the deceased, instructed by telegram from America, where the deceased's parents are travelling.

A farm labourer gives evidence of the finding of the body; also an inspector of police. Then the landlord of the "Stag" comes forward and says that he last saw the deceased leaving the inn in company with Mr. Phil Raynor; "taking Mr. Phil home, sir," explained the innkeeper.

"How do you mean 'taking him home?'" asked the coroner.

"Well, sir, Mr. Phil was a little the worse for liquor."

All eyes were turned to Phil. He looked down on the ground and did not see them, but he could feel them like so many hot coals glowing around him.

"The occasion was an unusual one, I believe?" said the coroner; "there had been a good deal of champagne drunk, had there not, and much merriment?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was the deceased, in your opinion, sober himself?"

"Yes, sir, quite sober. I noticed particularly that, though he usually takes a good deal, he hardly drank anything at all; but he was very noisy and excited, sir."

"Thank you, that will do."

"May I ask the witness a question?" said Stephen Markham in his dryest tone. "Was there anything during the evening like an altercation, or any sign of ill-feeling between Mr. Raynor and the deceased?"

A murmur ran round the court.

"Nothing that I saw, sir."

Markham repeated the question in an aggressive manner, but the coroner quickly silenced him by reminding him that the question had already been answered.

Phil felt the first blow had been struck, and by his own agent, his servant, his lawyer, Stephen Markham, and it rankled. His blood tingled, and he again resolved to make a fight for his life.

He heard his name called, and all eyes were turned upon him. Rising to his feet, he advanced to the end of the long table opposite the coroner. The Book was presented to him, and he took the oath.

The ground seemed to sink beneath his feet, the room to become mist before his eyes; but among all the faces there he only saw one, the pallid, haggard face of Stephen Markham, whose malignant eyes were fixed upon him as though trying to read his very soul.

The coroner, pitying his embarrassment, put to him a series of questions.

"You were at the dinner mentioned by previous witnesses?"

"Yes."

"The deceased was your friend—your greatest friend, I believe?"

"Yes."

"You had been drinking freely—were intoxicated, in fact?"

"Yes, for the first time in my life," said the hollow voice of Phil. Pauline's face flushed crimson, and she bowed her head.

Dr. Chester shifted uneasily in his seat.

"But you doubtless remember all that occurred?"

"I believe so."

"The deceased saw you home?"

"Yes."

"Where did he leave you?"

"At the lodge gate."

The lie came out with an effort; it stuck in his throat. The Book upon which he had been sworn was on the edge of the table, and his hand resting upon it. But he was lying for his life.

"Did he seem in his usual spirits?"

"I believe so."

Phil raised his hand to his forehead and swayed unsteadily, as though about to fall.

"That will do, thank you."

Stephen Markham rose to his feet again.

"If you have any questions to ask the witness," said the coroner, sharply, "he can be recalled after the evidence of the next witness. Mr. Raynor is suffering under considerable emotion. Let him sit down awhile."

Truly he was suffering. He would surely have fallen but for the helping hand of a juryman who guided him to a chair. Pauline's face reflected his suffering, and her heart bled for her lover.

"Inspector Grant, you have a pocket diary found upon the deceased, I believe?"

The inspector stepped to the table.

"Will you kindly hand it to me? This diary, gentleman," explained the coroner, "contains, I think, the solution of the whole business. I will read the entries only which refer to this sad case, and leave you to form your own conclusion."

He slowly turned over the leaves of the little book he held in his hand.

"I will read the first entry which appears to bear on this case," he said, and commenced in a low, reverent voice to read the words of the dead:

"'September 12th.

"'To-day I have received a terrible blow. My life is at an end, for Phil tells me he has asked Pauline to be his wife, and she has accepted him. The "Rose of Ilchester" is not for me. What is there for me to do but to put an end to my miserable life?'"

Pauline gave a little gasp of astonishment, and a murmur ran round the room.

"'September 13th.

"'I think I shall shoot myself. A broken heart isn't like a broken head. I can endure a good deal, but I am hard hit. If I had a gun here I'd do it now. Can I go to the dinner to-morrow and put a brave face upon it? I know Phil is not the changeable man that I am; he will make her happier than I, but——'

"Here the entry breaks off," said the coroner.

"'September 14th.

"'I'll go to the dinner and wish them joy, and then I think the best thing I can do is to drink myself blind drunk and shoot myself.'

"There is no entry after that, gentlemen," added the coroner.

A general sigh of relief and suppressed whispering followed this sudden change in the complexion of the whole business, and attention was again directed to Phil.

He did not see his chance of escape, nor did he realise the importance of what had been read. He knew Eddie's temperament, and they did not. He knew very well that Eddie was the sort of fellow to make entries like that in his diary after losing his last fiver on a racehorse. He had heard him threaten to shoot himself in almost these very words because the weather was bad and he couldn't go hunting.

It was his ordinary exaggerated vernacular. He was a youth of variable mood, his spirits up one minute and down the next. Phil himself never for a moment credited the theory of suicide,

though it was at once fully accepted by everybody. Pauline buried her face in her hands, and the sound of her sobs silenced the hubbub in court, and added to Phil's sufferings till he could almost have shrieked aloud, "I—*I* am the murderer!" but he sat still like one stunned.

Dr. Chester, who was much moved by his daughter's grief, gave his medical evidence labouring under strong emotion. The coroner cut it as short as possible, and there remained nothing but the verdict of the jury.

A lot of talking and whispering and asking of questions, and passing to and fro of blue papers and the pocket diary for a few minutes. And then one man stood up and spoke to the coroner a few words, and Phil realised that the proceedings were over, the jury having decided unanimously that Edgar Wilde had committed suicide whilst in a state of unsound mind, and that Mr. Phil Raynor left the court *without a stain upon his character*.

The words cut into his heart like knives. He stood up as if about to speak. But his last chance of unburdening his conscience was gone. He was hustled to and fro in the breaking up of the court; a few friends crowded round him and shook him by the hand; Pauline slipped hers into his and spoke to him, but he did not hear what she said. At last he managed to say that he wished to be completely alone; and, respecting what seemed to Dr. Chester his great grief, Pauline was drawn away by her father, and Phil left to himself.

Stunned and trembling, he turned to leave the place, but at the door he was met by Stephen Markham, who extended his hand with a sneering smile. Phil took it mechanically. It was as cold as his own.

"Allow me, Mr. Raynor, to congratulate you on *your narrow escape*," said Markham, with an emphasis upon the last words that was full of meaning.

Phil looked into the snake-like eyes of the man whom from that moment he knew to be his master. The man had read the truth, and held his secret.

Better for Phil would it have been to have unburdened his soul then; better for Pauline, for Stephen Markham had his own game to play.

Outside the inn an immense concourse of people had

assembled. All sorts of rumours had been flying about. It had been freely circulated that Mr. Phil Raynor, the new Squire of Chesfield, had murdered his friend Eddie Wilde; again, that Mr. Wilde had committed suicide; others heard that his death was caused by an accident. Consequently a great crowd had come in from all the country round to obtain reliable information.

The result of the inquest already was communicated to them, and the sigh of relief that went up from everybody showed how unwelcome would have been a verdict of wilful murder against so estimable a young man as Phil Raynor.

Few had really credited the rumour. Nevertheless, the suspense had been so great that when Phil, with ashen face and bloodshot eyes, emerged from the inn, the crowd, despite the solemnity of the occasion, sent up a great cheer. Only one half-suppressed cheer, for the voices were stilled by the sight of the grief-stricken youth.

Phil stared guiltily at the greeting. The innumerable eyes in that unexpected crowd of faces seemed to scorch him. He longed to turn back and hide himself. But many of the young men in the front of the crowd were his friends, and they hurried up to him and shook him heartily by the hand.

"Bravo, Phil!" cried the first one to grasp his hand. "We knew it was all an infernal lie."

"Left the court without a stain on his character," said another.

"So you have, Phil! so you have!" cried half a dozen others.

"The idea of anybody suspecting *you* of shooting Eddie Wilde! Preposterous!"

The crowd in the road, seeing the young man on the steps of the inn congratulated by at least a dozen friends, all doing their best to shake his arms off, were anxious to express their sense of apology due to him. It took the form of a buzz of conversation, and a loud murmur of indignation against the persons who had circulated the infamous report. They were as ready to honour him now as they would have been to revile him had he emerged from the inn in custody of the police as some had expected.

"Left the court without a stain on his character." The

sentence went rapidly from mouth to mouth. Phil heard it, and it stung him like a lash.

"Come away out of this. Come inside and have something to drink, you're upset," said a voice at his elbow. He felt the hand of Stephen Markham placed upon his arm, and like a child allowed himself to be drawn inside out of sight of the crowd. Markham motioned back the friends who were about to follow.

"This is not a merry-making, gentlemen," he snapped out. "There is a dead body upstairs."

Had Phil remained there another moment he would have been goaded to madness—would have struck aside his effusive friends, and shrieked to the crowd, "It is true! it is true! It was *I* who murdered Eddie Wilde! Revile me; tear me to pieces; take me away!"

But the voice of Stephen Markham brought back his senses like cold water dashed in his face.

"Take something strong to drink," said Markham, as soon as they were alone; "in another moment you would have said something and committed yourself."

"What do you mean?" stammered Phil.

"You know what I mean. Here, have some brandy, and get out by the back way and go home. Here, drink!"

Phil took the proffered glass with shaking hand. The man's eyes were upon him, and he dared not look up. He drank the brandy in gulps, and handed back the glass.

"Let me go!" he gasped.

"I should say that was the best thing you could do. Come the back way out, through the stables."

There was no emotion in the man's voice, only a cold-blooded calmness.

Phil followed unsteadily, like a panic-stricken criminal flying from torture, rather than as a man avoiding his friends.

At the yard gate Markham offered his cold, bony hand.

"Good-day; get home and—think. I shall call on you to-morrow morning, as already arranged, to hand over to you the title-deeds and an account of my stewardship of your new estate. I presume now you will reconsider your decision to deprive me of my post of agent and steward?"

"I—I never said I intended——"

"No; but you meant to all the same. You meant to appoint young Wilde my successor; but you will doubtless reconsider the whole matter now. It will be wiser to leave me alone—*now*."

There was an aggressive emphasis on the last word.

"Y—yes; I will think it over."

Stephen Markham smiled a self-satisfied, half-pitying smile. Phil was playing into the hands of the man who was no longer his servant.

Better by far would it have been for him to have rushed back to the crowd who were waiting to cheer as he departed, and cry to them, "Take me; take me! I am not innocent." Yet though he felt his hands were blood-stained, his heart was pure, and the instinct of self-preservation, always strong in youth, was strengthened in him by the thought of his love.

Humbled and grief-stricken, he turned to go. Impulse led him away from his fellow-men. He wanted to be alone with his secret, and away from eyes that might read the truth in his face.

There had been no mistaking the meaning words of Stephen Markham; the man guessed the truth and intended to use his power for his own ends, whatever they might be.

He tried to reason it out—to remember, if he could, however faintly, committing the awful deed. Instead of seeing before him the autumn-tinted trees and the bright September sunshine, his imagination conjured up the face of his friend, so lately living, now cold and stark as he had found him on the wet grass.

A voice within him whispered, "It was your doing; look at your handiwork; see the bright young life you have ended; see the man who loved you and loved Pauline, and yet did not stand in your path, but wished you happiness and long life. Long life, indeed! You have no right to live at all. He was among the first to wish you joy, crushing down the jealousy that was in his heart, and you have sent him to his death because you were a weak fool and drank when you had had enough. You let your drunken rage blind you and even blot out your memory, so that you only know you are a murderer and do not even remember enough to know when the deed was done. Perhaps the name of Pauline was on his lips as he died; perhaps——"

But why follow the workings of his tortured conscience? He was merciless in his self-denunciation. Poor fellow! he gave himself no quarter. He lashed himself into an agony of remorse and shame. He scarcely knew whither he was going, or did he notice that his steps were turned unconsciously towards his new home, traversing the very same path across the fields he had studiously avoided in the morning—the path which he and Eddie last trod together in the darkness after the dinner at the "Stag."

When he became conscious of his whereabouts a sudden faintness seized him.

"Is my mind deranged," he moaned, as he shut out the hateful scene, "that I had forgotten already? God forgive me!"

He turned away to the right and took a circuitous route, so that his eyes might not for a moment be turned towards that fatal field with its long, worn footpath, trailing over the hill like an endless serpent. Hopeless despair took possession of him, and being now alone with only the trees and hedges to hear him he flung himself face downward in the corner of a lonely meadow to sob out his uncontrollable grief.

"Oh, Eddie! Eddie! I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't want to lie when they asked me when I left you, but Pauline—I couldn't confess before her. And now they believe you shot yourself, and they will despise your memory, and bury your body by night, while I shall live and know that it was I—I who did it.

"And another has guessed it; he has read it in my face, one who hates me, and hated you, and perhaps—perhaps he will tell Pauline, and she will know after all. Then they will call me liar, as well as murderer: and they will take me and hang me, and she—she will loathe me as an unclean thing; and people will point at her and say, 'That is the woman who nearly married a murderer,' and she will go and hide her head in shame. Oh, it is horrible! horrible!"

And so he raved, weeping scalding tears, and beating the ground with his hands. At last words failed him, and he lay still upon his face sobbing his heart out, convulsed with overmastering grief—grief such as comes to a man only once in a lifetime, and leaves him afterwards an utterly different being;

grief as keen as a woman feels when the first dull cloud of earth is shovelled into the grave of her firstborn; grief such as the bridegroom feels when death snatches away the bride on his wedding night; grief greater than Cain felt when he slew his brother Abel.

Suddenly he became aware of a hand upon his shoulder, and looking up in alarm he beheld bending over him Pauline Chester, her face as white as his, and tears in her eyes.

"Phil—can I do nothing? Cannot I comfort you? I got away from them as soon as I could, and on my way to the Hall I saw you in the distance, and came across to you. Don't you want me, Phil?" she asked, somewhat hurt at the scared look with which he confronted her.

"Phil, I can't bear to see you in such grief," she cried, kneeling beside him as he lay on the grass, and throwing her arms about him. "It gives me a pain that nearly chokes me, and I——"

"How long have you been here?" he asked huskily, fearful lest his wild words should have been overheard.

"Only just this minute; didn't you hear me? Phil! Phil! don't look like that; you frighten me; don't give way to such grief. Can I do nothing?"

"Oh, Pauline, I am very wretched," exclaimed the distracted youth piteously.

"But I can comfort you. Rest your head on my shoulder, so; try to be resigned for my sake, for I do love you, Phil—I feel it more now you need love."

"Do you really love me, Pauline?" he asked hungrily, taking her soft, white face in his two big, strong hands, and looking fiercely into her eyes. "Do you love me with that great love that women sometimes feel—love that lasts through good and ill; would you love me if—if I were base and despised, if I were vile, a leper among men?"

He waited for her reply with bated breath.

"I could love you always—through everything, but not—not if you were base and vile, because that must always kill love; it would not be you; it would be—but why talk of absurdities? You are not yourself, Phil, to-day."

"No, I am not myself," he said in cold, measured tones. "Come with me a little way, Pauline; don't leave me yet;

come as far as the gate of the park, where we can see the Hall, our future home when—when you are my wife, Pauline. You have promised to be my wife, Pauline, have you not? Nothing will alter that?"

"Nothing," said Pauline, firmly. "We will think of that, and you must put out of your mind all thoughts of the horrors of to-day."

"Yes, we will put them out of our minds, Pauline—forget everything but that you will love me through everything."

Poor fellow! for a few moments he was almost happy.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRICE OF SILENCE — THE LAWYER MAKES A BOLD CONFESSION.

Stephen Markham, as before stated, was steward and solicitor to the Chesfield estates of the Raynor family. The property had for many years past been in his hands as trustee, pending the decision of the law courts in a lingering lawsuit. In the end the case had come to an unexpected conclusion by the sudden death of one of the litigants. When the claimant of the property died, Phil Raynor, instead of being an opposing party in the suit, found himself the sole remaining heir. The end came so suddenly that Stephen Markham was rather taken aback. The time had come for him to render an account of his stewardship, and he was not ready.

No one in Ilchester liked Markham. By a series of false moves and indiscreet actions he had contrived to make himself the most unpopular person in the place, yet in spite of that he prospered. It was rumoured that he had a large legal practice in London, and also that he had been remarkably successful in speculations in land, which of course was quite sufficient to account for his removal from an unpretentious villa to one of the large country houses outside the town.

Soon Stephen Markham rented a fine park and good shoot-

ing. The increase of his worldly possessions became more apparent every day, and with it the outward esteem of the world. A few wondered why so successful a man still retained the stewardship of the Chesfield estates. They would have ceased from wondering could they have been present at the interview between Phil and his steward on the day following the inquest.

True to his promise to Phil, Markham wended his way towards Chesfield Hall. He had not very far to go, his path being across the fields through the Bury meadow, where Eddie Wilde's dead body had been discovered. He took a circuitous route: he did not care to cross that field. He looked nervously in that direction. His glance wandered fitfully around him; he seemed almost afraid to be alone. But when well past the meadow, and nearing the lodge gates of Chesfield Hall, he drew himself together, put one hand carelessly in his pocket, and strolled leisurely up to the house.

Chesfield Hall was a long, low, rambling old place, half brick, half stone, with gables here and there, and occasionally a Gothic window, showing its connection with the old monastery of Chesfield, which once stood upon the same foundations. The grounds, which in the time of the previous owner had been well cared for, were now a wilderness; grass grew on the paths, and weeds had crept over the stone steps of the entrance. The lower windows were barred up, and inside the dust of years was upon the furniture. Gloomy enough it looked, and a strange habitation for a young man like Phil Raynor. He had only taken possession a few days before, and had already commenced the work of reform. His father's old housekeeper had also taken up her residence there, and had prepared two or three of the best rooms for Mr. Phil, and was meditating a regular campaign against dust and decay as soon as servants could be engaged.

"The place is certainly not a credit to its steward," said Markham, "everything going to rack and ruin," and he smiled a self-satisfied smile quite at variance with the spirit of his utterance.

A solitary gardener, who was making an onslaught on the rank weeds round the house, looked up for a moment at the intruder, stared at him, and continued his work, without so

much as a look of recognition or polite greeting. Markham strode over to him.

"What are you doing?" he asked, curtly.

"Working," replied the man, laconically, continuing his labours unconcernedly.

"Don't you know it is the proper thing to touch your hat to your betters?"

"Betters!" growled the man, leaning on his hoe as though surprised. "Betters! Humph!" Then he turned to his work again. He knew Markham well, but his master now was Mr. Phil Raynor.

"Insolent!" exclaimed Markham, as he turned upon his heel in a fury, muttering something about "discharge." The man grinned behind the lawyer's back, hoeing his weeds with a kind of savage satisfaction, as though Mr. Markham's head were lying at his feet, and he chipping bits off it.

When the door was opened by old Mrs. Berrie, the housekeeper, the visitor was in no pleasant mood. He was shown into a large, old-fashioned oak dining-room on the ground floor, where a cheerful fire was burning in the grate, for the day was chilly and the house damp. In the centre of the room was a large square table, and standing with his back to the fire, and facing the lofty Gothic windows, was Phil Raynor. He was pale, and his eyes red and bloodshot. They did not look the visitor straight in the face, but glanced that way for a moment, then away evasively.

"Good morning, Markham."

"Good morning," replied the lawyer, curtly. "I have called as arranged to deal with matters connected with the estate." He sat himself leisurely at the table, and commenced to open a bundle of papers.

There was an awkward pause, during which Phil stood with his back to the fire, looking out of the windows, whilst Markham arranged the papers.

"I am afraid this interview will not be a pleasant one," said Markham, in a hard voice.

"Oh!"

Another pause.

"I am afraid I have to disillusion you as to the value of the estate and as to the large income which has been supposed to

be accumulating during the last twelve years and should be in my possession."

"Well?"

"There is *no* accumulated income, and the estate is heavily mortgaged."

"No accumulated income? Where is it?" asked Phil, startled.

"The legal expenses—and——"

"I know what they were," said Phil; "they were not one-tenth of the rent roll. Where is the rest of the money?"

Markham did not look up, but fidgeted among his papers. "*The money has gone*," he said, slowly and deliberately, in hard measured tones.

"Gone? Gone where?"

"*I have taken it*," said Markham, coolly, looking his questioner full in the face for the first time. There was a self-possession in his manner and a malignant insolence in his look which startled the questioner.

"Taken it? What do you mean?"

"Well, *embezzled it, then*. Is that plain enough for you?"

"Embezzled it!" cried Phil, astounded. "You scoundrel!" But the words died upon his lips, for Markham rose suddenly to his feet.

"Scoundrel?" he cried. "What are you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Phil, feebly recoiling.

"You know what I mean," continued Markham. "Do you suppose I should have been here this morning to tell you this? Do you suppose I should even have been in this country if I had not known what I do know? Do you think I should have run the risk of criminal prosecution if I had not suddenly realised that you dare not prosecute me?"

"Dare? I dare—and will."

"You will not. When I found that you, the new owner, were going to hand over my duties and my books to that young blackguard—you know whom I mean—young Wilde——"

"Silence!" thundered Phil, leaning across the table. "You shall not speak thus of him. Eddie Wilde is dead."

"Yes, and *you murdered him!*" said Markham, leaning on the table and looking him straight in the eyes.

In the man's face was a perfect fury of hate, and a message of no mercy.

Phil, taken aback and overcome, covered his face with his hands. He staggered to an arm-chair by the fireside and flung himself into it.

For a full minute there was a dead silence. Neither moved. Phil with his face bowed down, the swindling lawyer standing by the table leaning across it resting on his hands. Markham surveyed his victim with savage satisfaction.

"Do you think," he went on in a half hiss, half whisper, "that I didn't see my advantage when I read the truth in your face at the inquest? Do you think that I forgot in those moments all the slights and insults that you and young Wilde and the others about here have heaped upon me? Do you think I don't know who were the young fools who hissed me at the hunt dinner last year, and threw flour at me and nearly brained me at the election meetings? Do you think I don't know who paid the sexton to toll the bell of the church all day, and burnt my effigy in the market-place at night, and sent a coffin to my house when I got the poacher hanged who shot my gamekeeper? Do you think I don't know who shot me 'accidentally' with a paper pellet from his gun while we were out shooting the other day? Do you think I don't know? It was young Wilde, and you and your set, who persecuted and insulted me. I swore that some day I would be even with you. Do you hear me, you young cub?"

The last words were almost a hiss of passion.

"Yes, I hear," said Phil, hoarsely, rising quickly to his feet, "I hear you."

He made a sudden dash at his torturer, who, taken completely by surprise, found a strong hand upon him and in a moment was crashing downwards to the floor, falling prone upon the hearthrug with the stalwart young man above him.

"Yes, I hear," repeated Phil between his teeth. "You venomous reptile! You cowardly scoundrel! You deserved it. The best I could do now would be to give you a good horsewhipping."

"Let me go!" gasped the terrified man.

"Let you go? I could gladly strangle you—lie still!"

"Murderer!" gurgled the choking man, "you will kill me too!"

Phil, after a moment, loosed his hold and rose to his feet, recovering his self-control, whilst the prostrate Markham raised himself upon his hands, furious with passion, and almost spitting at his assailant in his rage.

"Murderer! I could send you to the gallows if I wished, and I will, too."

"You lie!" exclaimed Phil, infuriated by the taunt. "I did not do—it is all a lie!"

"Ah, no doubt. You left him at the lodge gate, as you told them at the inquest. That was not a lie, I suppose?"

"How do you know that?" exclaimed Phil, his hands twitching as though ready to fly at the throat of the tormenter. "How do you know that?"

"Because I saw you! I saw you staggering home alone in the early morning. Ah! you may well turn pale; you believe me now! I saw you from the windows of my house, and I watched you. I knew you were lying to them at the inquest, but I held my peace. I knew my turn would come. It has come," cried Markham, struggling to his feet. "You may lay your hands upon me, you may half strangle me if you like; but unless you murder me I am your master, and I will torture you, I will crush you, I will grind you beneath my heel, for I hate you! I hate you!" cried the spluttering coward as, white with overmastering passion, he hissed his words at the young man, all the while backing away from him as if expecting another onslaught.

But Phil was struck dumb and powerless by what he had heard. He merely stared at the creature before him like one fascinated by a horrible thing.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked, after a pause. "How much do you want to keep silence? I suppose that is your game?"

"Ah! you begin to realise your peril," replied Markham, with a sneer. "You would not care for Miss Chester to know what I know."

"Silence! your lips are too vile to mention her name."

"And the murderer's are not, I suppose?" snarled Markham. "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Ah! the reminder is opportune, I see. You had better be calm and come to business."

Phil sank into a chair, flung his arms upon the table, and buried his face in them.

Markham, leisurely smoothing his ruffled hair, slipped into another chair and drew it up to the table. He bent over his prostrate enemy with a look of fiendish satisfaction.

"I mean to revenge myself upon you," he said. "I mean to make you smart for this, and all I have suffered at your hands — and his. You shall be humbled, *or you shall be hanged!* So long as you do my bidding you shall go free; but so much as utter a word against me, or whisper to another that I am not an honourable man, as the world knows me, and I will proclaim from the housetops that Philip Raynor is the murderer of Edgar Wilde. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear," groaned the wretched youth.

"And this money of yours which I have appropriated to my own uses, you must give me a legal receipt for it, as though you had received it, thus absolving me from all liability; and the mortgages, you must pay them off as best you can. That is the price of my silence. I thus evade the delights of penal servitude, and in return give you your life, which by right belongs to the common hangman. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Then you had better sign this receipt I have prepared."

From a sideboard close by the lawyer passed the ink and pens, placing them before the dazed and despondent youth, together with a sheet of blue paper containing a statement of moneys supposed to have been received.

"Come, you had better sign."

No answer.

"It is your only chance; you had better sign it. Do you hear?"

Slowly Phil raised himself, hesitated, and then without so much as glancing at the wording of the paper, took the pen in his shaking hand and scrawled his signature to the document, which placed the thief out of his power and by the same act made himself the slave of his persecutor from that time forward.

Had he but held out, each of them would have stood upon an equal footing, and neither would have dared to raise a

finger against the other. But as it was, the cunning of the lawyer had outwitted him. He had handed himself over, bound hand and foot, into the toils of his enemy; nor did he recover himself sufficiently to understand what he had done until Markham, with a smile of conscious triumph, put the paper into his pocket, and, taking up his hat and papers, sardonically wished him good morning, expressing his determination of calling again soon to advise him as to his future conduct of the estate and his engagement to Miss Chester. This was the last parting shot, and the words struck fresh terror to his soul.

Then by degrees the folly of what he had just done rushed clearly upon him.

* * * * *

In his stormy interview Markham would have lowered his voice a little had he known there was another listener. The room was on the ground floor, with long, narrow windows, opening outwards, one of which was open. Outside the house, with his body drawn flat against the wall, and with his face as near to the window as he could get without being seen, was a man grasping a hoe in his left hand, and pretending to be picking off the dead leaves of a creeper with the other. The angry voices had aroused his curiosity, and he was listening. Hardly a word escaped him. Directly Markham's "good morning" announced the end of the interview he moved a few steps away, and, seizing his hoe, commenced again the monotonous "click! click!" attacking the weeds as though nothing had disturbed his labours.

CHAPTER IV.

A FIGHT WITH CONSCIENCE—SHOULD HE TELL HER?

Markham emerged from the house his blood hot with conscious triumph. He loved to inspire fear in his fellows. It flattered him to see the weak tremble and the cowardly cringe. In their debasement he felt his own miserable power.

The uncivil gardener being the first person to attract his attention, he determined to avenge the man's previous insults.

"Ah, you're still here, I see," snarled the lawyer, "and precious little work you seem to have done. Why, you've scarcely moved a weed."

"Be that your business?" asked the man, leaning on his hoe and looking Markham in the face.

"Yes, it is my business. I am steward of this estate and you are my servant. You can clear out at the end of the week. We don't want lazy vagabonds here. What's your name and where do you come from?"

"I'm engaged by Mr. Raynor, not by you."

"What's your name?"

"You'd best not arst my name, it ain't a pleasant one to you," said the man, savagely, as he dropped the hoe and clenched his fists in passion.

Markham retreated nervously; he had a dread of physical encounters, and no wish for a repetition of what he had endured at the hands of Phil.

"My name's Job Cassidy," continued the man. "You got my brother hanged for poaching—hanged for defending his life agin a brace of keepers. And now you raise your hand agin me. I'm like my brother, I am; and if I'm driven desperate it'll be a bad look-out for you, Mr. 'Mealy' Markham. You'd best let me alone."

"Do you dare to threaten me?" cried Markham, incensed at the use of the nickname "Mealy," given him by Eddie Wilde on account of his sallow complexion.

"No, I don't believe in shooting in cold blood," said the man, meaningly; "I leave that to folk of better quality."

"None of your insolence! You go at the end of the week. Do you hear?"

"Are you my master?"

"Yes."

"You think you are, but I tell you, Mr. Mealy Markham, that you're not." He put his face close to the lawyer's. "Them as knows of a murder and don't speak is murderers too. That's the law, ain't it, Mr. Markham?"

"What do you mean?" gasped the lawyer, taken off his guard.

"Never mind! Mr. Wilde shot himself, didn't he? They told us that at the inquest. He wasn't shot by anybody else —oh, no!" said Cassidy, picking up his hoe, and speaking in a milder tone. He commenced to hoe the weeds again vigorously. "He shot himself, he did," continued the man, "and all for love of a gal. Poor young gentleman!"

"Pshaw! the man's mad," said Markham, turning upon his heel and walking away.

The gardener gazed after him, resting upon his hoe, till the retreating figure was out of sight, then returned thoughtfully to his work.

"Them as knows of murder and don't speak is murderers too," he muttered again and again, as if fascinated with the idea. "Click! click!" went the hoe all day monotonously, and gradually the weeds around Phil's home began to disappear.

* * * * *

That afternoon Job was dispatched by Phil to Ilchester with a note for Miss Chester.

"Dearest Pauline," it ran, "can you get away alone this evening, and meet me at the gate by Hazel Wood, at the end of the park? I want to have you all to myself for a little while. I am very wretched. "PHIL."

Job Cassidy trudged through the park with the missive, evidently deep in thought. He was a curious-looking man of about forty years of age, dark and swarthy as a gipsy, with eyes like coals, and a hard mouth expressive of great determination and incurable obstinacy. He was the type of man common in all country districts. There is generally one of his kind in every village—a man of the labouring class, different from all others in the place, idle, yet never poor, solitary in his habits, and somewhat of a mystery—a man of repellent exterior, whom the mothers threaten to give naughty children to that he may "take them right away."

Job Cassidy at one time had a twin brother so much like himself that it was impossible to tell them apart. The two

were incurable poachers. Time and again they had been imprisoned, but more often they escaped, owing to the fact that when one brother was arrested it was always declared that the other brother was the offender; and unless the poachers were taken red-handed it was almost impossible to obtain a conviction.

At last, however, a gamekeeper was shot in a scrimmage on Stephen Markham's land, and in the dead man's hand a piece of cloth was found, afterwards proved to belong to the coat of Will Cassidy. Both brothers were arrested, Will Cassidy having the torn coat upon him. Job was able to prove an *alibi* at the outset, or rather the authorities proved it for him, although it was freely declared that both brothers were in the scrimmage. Consequently Will was put upon his trial and condemned to death. He died impenitent, protesting his innocence, and he died game. Although the papers, as they always do, declared that he "walked to the scaffold with a firm step," it was soon very well known that he did nothing of the kind. On the contrary, he fought manfully with his gaolers, and, bound hand and foot, was carried to the drop, loudly shrieking that he was innocent, and calling vainly upon his brother to help him. The sickening ordeal was gone through to the very end; but before the body of Will Cassidy the poacher was cut down, the warders of the gaol knew in their hearts that they had murdered an innocent man.

Both before and after the trial feeling ran very high in the neighbourhood against Markham, who had strained every nerve to bring about the conviction. The county gentry shut their ears, and were at heart thankful that one at least of the two poacher-pests was out of the way. Not so some of the younger men, foremost among them Eddie Wilde and Phil Raynor, who, with a number of others, succeeded in incensing the whole neighbourhood against Markham. His effigy was burnt on the day of the execution, the church bell was tolled, and an oak coffin was deposited at the door of his house at night. When on the death of the common hangman a paragraph appeared in the local paper stating that the post of hangman was vacant, cuttings from at least fifty copies of the paper were sent him in different envelopes, apparently from different people, but really from Mr. Eddie and his boon companions.

Markham took the trouble to find all this out, and naturally he did not love his persecutors.

A good deal of sympathy was shown Joe Cassidy. It was supposed a small subscription raised on his behalf would compensate him for the loss of his brother; but Job was made of sterner stuff. The twins had lived and toiled and sinned together for forty years as one man. After the execution he became morose and silent. Some said he never smiled, and with the exception of occasional outbursts he rarely poached. At times when he had taken too much ale he would fling himself down by the roadside and cry like a child for brother Will.

Phil and his friend Eddie Wilde were the only people who had ever befriended him. The Ishmael whose hand had been against every man was touched when he found for the first time that every man's hand was not against him.

Now, though a dull, heavy, and somewhat obtuse man on most topics, on the question of shooting and night encounters Job was very alert. Naturally, the statements of Markham, overheard by the open window, put an entirely new complexion on the death of Eddie Wilde. His natural cunning at once told him to mistrust the lawyer, and by no effort of reasoning could he bring himself to believe that Mr. Phil could have shot his friend. All he had heard his master say was, "I did not do it! It is all a lie!" and he believed him.

Reasoning it over as he trudged along, a new possibility occurred to the poacher. Two men with guns crossing the fields at midnight, coming suddenly upon poachers, who might mistake them for keepers, would be likely to get shot at. After turning the matter over and over in his dull way, he came eventually to the conclusion that Stephen Markham had shot Mr. Wilde, his only reason for so thinking being that he would very much like to see Mr. Markham hanged. The wish was father to the thought, and though he had no possible grounds for his wild assumption, he decided once and for all that Mealy Markham was a murderer, and that he would be hanged, and brother Will avenged.

"This 'ere business is a little beyond me," he said, after a while, "I'll talk it over with Nicky Nobson. He's got a clear head, has Nicky. He'll see right through the whole thing in a minute."

Nicky Nobson was a brother poacher whom we shall meet later on.

* * * * *

The letter was duly delivered to Pauline, and before the sun set on that eventful day she wended her way out of Ilchester by a narrow lane, accompanied by a splendid collie. Waiting for her by the gate of Hazel Wood stood Phil, the once light-hearted youth, now a care-worn man.

As she advanced along the lane with smiling recognition at the waiting figure, her head erect and her light cloak flying in the breeze, Phil looked humbly upon her as an angel in whose sight he should be an abhorrent thing. But he hungered for sympathy; she was to him a balm for all wounds, the healer of all heart-sickness. He longed to confess to her, to fall down at her feet, and pray for pitying words, even though they were but the words she would use to her dog. Every moment he was becoming more vile in his own sight.

As she approached him with outstretched hands he felt that he ought not to touch her, yet the mere pressure of her fingers sent the blood coursing madly through him. He enfolded her in his arms and pressed hot kisses on her lips like a guilty lover snatching moments of forbidden love.

"Phil, how pale your face is, and your lips burn. You hold me so tightly I can scarcely breathe."

"My darling, when I take you in my arms I feel I want to keep you there for ever, for fear some one should steal you from me. Look into my face, sweet, look into my eyes, and tell me that you feel a great unalterable love for me, such as I feel for you—a love that nothing can shake. Nothing you could ever do would make me cast you from my heart. If you were vile, if you were outcast, if you were faithless, one look from those eyes would bring me back to you. Tell me, Pauline, do you feel such love as that for me?"

"Phil, why do you ask?"

"Tell me," he pleaded, changing suddenly from passionate to pleading tones; "it is life and death to me."

"You know I love you, Phil. Have I not said so again and again? Why do you hold me so, and why do you look so wildly at me? You frighten me! Has anything happened to make you doubt me?"

He was longing for her to fling her arms about his neck and vow eternal faithfulness through good and ill. But she was of gentler mould, and loved, never questioning or reasoning why. She drew herself gently from his fierce grasp and took his hands in her white palms.

"What is the matter, Phil?" she asked, anxiously gazing into his hard set face and blood-shot eyes. "The death of poor Eddie has upset you terribly; you are not your old self again yet."

He flushed palpably at the mention of the name, and she saw it.

"Surely, Phil," she said, softly, "you are not jealous—jealous of the dead? I—I guessed he loved me, Phil, though I never told you. But I did not love him. He was so wild and restless and reckless, and did cruel things, torturing harmless animals in sport—things such as would have made me hate him if I had become his wife. And the cruel way in which he made poor Mr. Markham's life a burden to him! And then—then he killed himself because I loved you. Oh, Phil, it was horrible! In a moment of disappointment, when excited by drink, he took away the life that God gave him!"

How words can stab and cut like knives!

"I pity him from the bottom of my heart, but—but somehow I cannot respect him. And I have just heard, Phil, of the awful suspicion his act cast upon you; and some people say that if the diary had not been found upon him you might have been accused of—*of murdering him.* How awful that would have been!"

The world seemed shaking beneath him.

"And suppose, little one, what the gossips said about me had been true," he said, in a hollow voice, with the feeblest of forced smiles, "and I *had*, in a drunken frenzy, murdered my best friend, could you have forgiven me and loved me then? Just for curiosity, now—tell me!"

"Phil, why do you ask such an impossible question?"

"But tell me," he repeated, in tones the earnestness of which was only too real. "Tell me, I want to know. I want to know what sort of love yours is."

"I think," she said, after a thoughtful pause, "I think I should—I should——"

"Well?" he gasped, clutching her arm.

"Phil, don't—you are hurting me."

"Tell me, what would love like yours do?" he asked more gently.

"I think my love would die of horror and shame, and only pity would be left—pity to think that I had loved one who had fallen so low. Ugh! a *murderer!* Phil, think of it!" she said, with a pretty little shudder.

"But—if *I* were the murderer—I, Phil, who hold you in my arms now—would you cease to love *me?*"

"*You* a murderer?" she said, with a smile, and dropping her head upon his shoulder. "Oh, Phil, what nonsense! Let us talk of something pleasanter. When I rest my head upon your shoulder so, all the world seems peaceful, and there are no murderers in it. And I feel that you are so good, and great, and strong, and I love nothing better in the world than to be with you, and always with you."

They were leaning against the gate leading to the wood, he holding her in his arms, she with her head nestling softly upon his broad shoulder. Her eyes were closed in sweet contentment while she listened to the breeze humming in the trees. She did not see that tears were filling his eyes, till one burning drop fell upon her cheek.

She opened her eyes suddenly, and looked up at him startled and astonished.

"Phil—Phil dear! Phil! tell me what is the matter."

She wound her arms lovingly about his neck, and looked tenderly up into his face, her great love shining in her eloquent eyes.

"Phil, you are unhappy. Tell me, and I will comfort you."

Should he tell her? Should he tell the truth, the whole truth, there and then, while her kisses were still warm upon his lips?

Should he tell her?

He could not decide.

He gazed earnestly and sadly into her face as he held her. She repeated her question; but as he gazed into those trusting eyes his conscience told him that he must not make her a partner in his guilty secret.

He said in his heart, "I am a murderer;" "she must never, never know it!"

Pauline's dog, tired of being ignored, endeavoured to make his presence felt by leaping up to Phil and barking vigorously.

"Down, Bess, down!" cried Phil, glad of anything to divert the conversation. "See, Pauline, Bess objects to my taking so much notice of you. Let us walk on a little."

He slipped his arm through hers, and they passed into the wood, dim with twilight shadows.

Neither spoke for a time, and even Bess trotted along silent and subdued.

Pauline had never known Phil like this—so gloomy, so reserved. His manner chilled and depressed her, and, by degrees, she divined with womanly instinct that some cloud had descended between them, and things were no longer as they used to be. The change was incomprehensible.

As they penetrated deeper into the wood, Bess growled ominously, and plunged into the bracken. Presently they heard her a little way off, barking vigorously, then a scuttering, and crackling of branches, as somebody in the thicket made off.

"What is it?" cried Pauline, in alarm; "call her back, Phil."

"Poachers, I expect," said Phil, dashing into the bushes; "the place swarms with them." He was too late, the intruder had disappeared.

"Come back, Phil!" cried Pauline, in terror; "if they are poachers they may shoot you."

Phil reluctantly returned, followed by Bess.

"Come away from the place, Phil," pleaded timid Pauline, with scared face. "I so hate the thought of poachers and gamekeepers, and all people who shoot and kill dumb animals, and sometimes they shoot human beings and commit *murder!*"

He allowed her to lead him out of the wood, but her words rang in his ears.

How she would loathe him if she knew! He felt stifled. He wanted to get away—right away from all the world, where he could forget the horrible secret throbbing in his brain. Conscience, merciless conscience, was racking his soul. He tried to still the voice, but it whispered, "Murderer! murderer! murderer!" beating time with his heart.

Pauline talked to him cheerily, though she herself felt sad;

she tried to raise his spirits, but he scarcely heard the words she uttered; the voice of conscience drowned even them with the ghastly taunt, "Murderer! What right have you to the love of a good and beautiful woman?"

They walked in silence side by side, as lovers do, Phil's thoughts on the past, hers on the future. The recent death of Eddie Wilde and the scare in the wood had set her thoughts going in a nervous strain.

Presently she drew her arm through Phil's, and looked up into his troubled face.

"Phil," she said, softly, "I want you to do me a great favour?"

"What is it, darling?"

"I am afraid you will laugh at me, but—but you know what a horror I have of shooting and killing?"

"Yes," he answered with a start.

"Well, I want you to promise me to give up shooting, and never touch a gun again!"

"W—why?" he stammered.

"It is only my fancy, and a very foolish one no doubt, but—but it seems so cruel, and so dangerous, and—and it is the only thing I have ever asked you to give up for my sake. Will you do it, Phil?"

He was trembling and pale as he looked into her soft blue eyes. In his own there was a wild earnestness she could not understand. He raised his hat from his head, and looking heavenward, there and then took an oath.

"Yes, before my Maker," he cried, "I swear it—I will never touch a gun more—never! as long as I live, so help me God!"

Then, overcome by the tempest raging within him, he clasped her to his heart sobbing like a woman.

"Pauline, Pauline, you must bear with me!" he cried. "You—you cannot understand and—and I cannot explain."

"Phil, Phil, tell me what it is!" she cried, clinging to him in alarm. "Tell me. What have I said—what have I done?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Tell me, Phil—tell me what I can do to comfort you."

"You can do nothing, Pauline. Leave me to my wretchedness."

"I cannot leave you so, Phil."

"Yes, yes," he said, mastering himself with an effort, "better go. It is getting dark. There is the high road again. Good-bye."

Once more he kissed her, then turned and hurried away, leaving her astonished and hurt, gazing after him with tear-bedimmed eyes until he disappeared in the darkness of the wood. She almost expected he would return, but she was disappointed. He had fled from her in so strange a mood. What could it mean?

CHAPTER V.

THE GUN IN THE WOOD—WHOSE IS IT?—ANOTHER SHOOTING AFFAIR—A VOICE IN THE STORM.

Let us go again into the wood to the point where the watchful collie had scented mischief.

It is getting dark. The sun has set and twilight mists are settling over the fields. In the wood it is darker still, but there is just light enough to distinguish the footpaths. The hazel bushes here and there stand out like giant goblins, while the little patches of light in between take upon themselves the likeness of grey ghosts.

Deep in the wood, where no footpaths mark the way and the bracken covers all the ground, two men are cautiously moving one behind the other, making their way with difficulty through the entangled bushes. The foremost is acting as guide to the second, in whose heavy, slouching figure it is easy to recognise Job Cassidy.

"It's down 'ere or 'ereabouts, Job," said the first man. "I was just a-laying 'old of it by the barrel when a bloomin' great sheep dorg comes a snapping round my 'eels and I cut it slippy."

The man spoke with an accent that stamped him at once as hailing from Whitechapel. It was Cassidy's friend Nobson, the poacher, a light, spare man, slippery as an eel and alert as

a squirrel, with a merry twinkle in his eye and a joke ever ready at the tip of his tongue.

"Are ye sure it's about 'ere?" said Job, in a whisper, turning to the left.

"It was under a big bush with a little bush aside of it. Hist! what was that?"

Both men stopped and listened.

"Bain't nothing," said the stolid Job, after a moment. "The wind's a-getting up, that's all. We shall have rain afore long."

"It seems a bit lonesome here, don't it?" said Nicky, peering into the gloom of the wood. "I feel nervous like as if keepers was about."

"No fear of keepers," grunted Job.

"Ah! 'ere we are," said Nicky, suddenly stopping before a bush and kicking away the bracken from the bottom; "it's in 'ere."

"Where?"

"Here," said Nicky, dropping on his knees. "Strike a light."

Job struck a light, which fluttered in the breeze and went out.

"All right, I see it," said Nicky, diving his hand into the underwood; "here it is," and he drew out from its hiding-place a double-barrelled gun.

"Light another, and let's have a look at 'im."

Job lit another light, and kneeling beside his companion ran the light along the gun, examining it from muzzle to stock.

"One trigger's cocked, Job. It's loaded; be keerful. It's a good 'un, ain't it?"

"Beauty," replied Job, laconically.

"Whose is it? That's what I want to know," said Nicky. "It don't belong to no pals of ours."

"No, that's no poacher's gun, Nicky; that's a gentleman's gun, one as cost a twenty-pun note at least."

The light went out and left them in darkness again.

"Wot's it mean, Job?" whispered Nicky.

"I dunno."

"I know, Job—it means shootin'."

"Of course it does; any fool knows that. It's a gun, ain't it?" said Job, testily.

"But wot does the gen'leman want to 'ide it for, eh? I come upon it looking for a place to set a snare, and I was surprised so sudden by the dorg that I 'ad to bolt like winking. Let's 'ave another look at it. Strike another light."

Again a light flickered unsteadily in the wind, which was rising rapidly and moaning mournfully through the lonely expanse of the wood.

"Hush!" cried Nicky, suddenly dashing the light out of his companion's hand. "Listen! I knew I 'eard summat."

There was a lull in the wind, and for a while the rustling leaves were still.

"There's some one in the wood, I swear," whispered Nicky.

Both men listened again.

"There, don't you hear it?"

"Better put it back again," whispered Job.

"Listen! there, again!"

"Put it back," said the timid Job; "it gives me the creeps to see you a-listenin' when I can't hear nothing. Put it back. It wouldn't do for me or you to be found with a gun the likes o' that about us."

Nicky slipped the gun back under the hedge softly, and listened again.

"Come away, Nicky, we——"

"Down, Job, down," whispered Nicky, lying down almost flat on his face and pulling Job down with him. "Keep still. Can't you hear now?—on the other side of the bush."

Both men lay as still as death. Some one was creeping through the bracken stealthily, stopping every now and then and feeling with his feet for something on the opposite side of the bushes.

"The gun! the gun!" was the thought which flashed upon the minds of the two men at the same time; "he's looking for the hidden gun."

After a while the stealthy figure came right opposite them—they could see a moving shadow through the bushes. It stopped again, and for a moment there was silence.

Nicky's hand was resting lightly on the muzzle of the gun, and before he quite realised the fact, it was drawn quickly through from the other side of the hedge.

So disappointed was Nicky at the prospect of losing his

newly-found prize that he altogether forgot himself. Uttering a half-smothered exclamation, he jumped up.

An inarticulate cry of terror broke from the lips of the seeker of the gun, and the crashing of the branches showed that the newcomer had turned, and was decamping hurriedly.

Nicky, now that he was certain it was not a keeper he had to deal with, slipped round the bush in a moment, followed slowly by Job.

"Come back, Nicky," cried the cowardly Job, hoarsely.

But Nicky was dashing expertly through the crackling branches pursuing the retreating shadow, and in a shorter space of time than it takes to describe was near enough to grab at the man.

"Drop that gun!" he cried with an oath.

For answer the black shadow threw him off and levelled the gun. There was a flash, a loud report, and a cry from the terrified Job behind, who went with a crash through the bracken as he fell to the earth.

The figure disappeared, and Nicky, thoroughly frightened though unhurt, turned back to Job, who was moaning loudly.

"Are you hurt, Job?" he asked.

"I dunno," groaned Job.

"Dunno? If you dunno, you ain't. If you was, you'd know fast enough. And what's this I've got?" said Nicky. "S'elp me if it ain't 'is bloomin' necktie! I must 'a pulled it off when I grabbed 'im. And there's a pin in it too! Give us one of your lights, Job; I've got a bit of candle in my pocket. We'll see what's the damage. It can't be much."

The candle was lighted with difficulty.

"It's in my left foot, I think," blubbered Job.

"Let's look. Yus, yer boot's tore. Take it off!"

The boot was unlaced and taken off.

"Your stocking ain't tore nor marked, and, s'elp me, Job, listen what's inside your boot!" said Nicky, rattling it. He dived his hand into the boot. "Blest if it ain't a shot! My! what a brute! Keep that, Job, for luck."

The moaning wind blew the candle out, leaving them again in darkness profound, and Nicky muttered a curse.

"Slip on yer boot again, Job, and come along out of this," whispered Nicky, lowering his voice again as if awed by the

solemn stillness of the wood. "This 'ere business is best thought out quiet. Let's get across to the "Baker's Arms," and 'ave a look at the necktie."

Job scrambled clumsily to his feet, and shook himself as if still uncertain whether he had not sustained more serious damage, but finding himself unharmed, followed his active comrade, who was groping his way in the darkness through the rustling bracken.

The wind rises and falls in little gusts, then all is still again save the leaves, that keep up a whispering among themselves after the wind has lulled. Silence, the profound silence of the country, broods over the lonely wood. There are no stars in the sky to relieve the blackness; the heavens seem to have descended upon the earth; the air is inky black, and the land sable velvet. Now the rain begins to fall; softly at first; you cannot see it, but you can hear it pattering on the leaves. Soon it pours.

There is no wind now, only the hiss of the rain as it pelts on to the dry earth. Then a low rumble of thunder; the foundations of the black darkness seem to shake; and the rain hisses and hisses, louder and louder, as though the earth were swarming with legions of fighting imps.

The two poachers make their way out of the wood in the direction of the town. By this time the rain is falling in sheets.

"Quick, Job, cut across the fields. Come on. Look slippy, or we shall be drenched. My! 'ow it is comin' down! There's a reservoyer busted up above, I should say, by the way it's pelting."

"Come under a tree," suggested Job.

"Not me! Listen to that," said Nicky, as a crash of thunder shook the heavens.

There was nothing to guide them but the distant twinkling lights, blurred by the sheets of falling rain.

"Keep close, Job, and run for it," said Nicky.

The two men started off at a heavy trot, stumbling blindly in the darkness.

How it rained! They could hear it buzzing all around them, and it drenched them through and through. Job Cassidy kept close by his friend, for he was afraid of the night and the storm —as cowardly as a schoolboy.

Next a flash, and a crash as though the world had split in twain. For a moment the landscape was illumined far and wide with a sulphurous blue light, weird and awful; the earth flashed out exaggerated and distorted like a glimpse of hell in a horrible dream.

A cry of terror broke from the lips of Job Cassidy, and he grasped the arm of his comrade.

"Did you see that?" he cried.

"Yes," said the other, hoarsely.

In the open field, and passing before them, they had seen the ghostly form of a man.

Job clutched his friend in terror, and Nicky's teeth began to chatter.

"Shut up, yer fool!" cried Nicky. "It was only some one crossing the field."

Another blinding flash lighted up the field, and again they saw the apparition—this time farther away.

Job gave a wild shriek of terror, and fell on his knees praying to God for mercy.

"Job! Job! you bloomin' funk, stow that!" said Nicky, shaking him roughly. "Are yer going mad, yer fool, becos' yer see a bloke caught in a storm like yerself?"

"It was Will!" moaned the wretched man, "it was brother Will! Hanged! and I did it!" he wailed in his terror, and his voice rang out through the night.

Another flash, and another shriek from the terror-stricken lout. But there was no sign of the strange apparition. Job clutched his friend, and moaned like a man demented. His terror infected his companion, and Nicky, never a very brave man, felt his legs shaking beneath him.

"Job, don't go a-frightenin' me like that!" he whispered, hoarsely. "Hold tight on to me, and come on. The 'Arms' ain't more 'an five 'undred yards off. Come on."

Arm in arm they shuffled onward in the darkness, first walking cautiously, then running, until they reached the high road, when Nicky's courage returned sufficiently to allow him to give Job a sound rating for his strange behaviour.

"I really should ha' thought as you'd ha' knowed better. Yer carried on jest like as though you'd 'got 'em,' strike me lucky if you didn't!" said Nicky, with offended dignity.

Job took no notice, but tramped on close beside his friend, blubbering softly. Poor wretch! his grief was very real.

"Look 'ere, Job," said Nicky, "since your unfortunate brother got 'ung for shooting a keeper in that little affair in which we all 'ad an 'and you've bin a different man; an' if you take my tip you'll shut your mouth, and keep that flapper of yours from wobbling too much about who the real person was as knocked over the keeper. If you asks me who it was I should say as all three of us bein' there we all three did it, and if you go about blubbering after 'Brother Wull,'" said Nicky, mimicking Job's manner of speech, "it'll be a bad thing for your mother as she ever 'ad twins. D'ye understand?"

"Yes," said Job, somewhat sobered.

"Well, then, 'ere we are. Come along in and get some wet *inside* as well as hout."

The "Baker's Arms" was a cosy wayside inn. The doors opened on to a snug little bar lighted with a hanging lamp. To the left there was a sanded tap-room, and to the right a bare, old-fashioned apartment dignified by the name of bar parlour. The bar was empty now except for a stolid country lass who acted in the dual capacity of housemaid and barmaid when required.

The sight of the shining pewters and glittering glasses all in rows behind the counter roused Nicky to something like his ordinary good humour.

"Good evening, miss. Wet, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is," replied the stolid maid, with an expression which added, "Orders, please."

"I persume you ain't drying no clothes to-day, miss?"

No reply from the stodgy barmaid.

"Becos if you was a-drying anythink on the line, I was a-goin' to suggest as 'ow you might 'ang my friend out too. 'E looks a bit moist, don't 'e? Or if you 'as a couple of umbrella-stands you can spare you might lend 'em to us, and we'll stand in 'em to pervent ourselves drippin' on to the floor and flooding the establishment."

Again no reply from the stolid barmaid, who, having no sense of humour, looked upon a facetious remark as an impertinence.

"Well, then, two pots of four ale for me and my friend the

Dook of Westminister." Then with a jerk of his thumb towards his melancholy comrade, "This is the Dook."

Job looked very solemn, and the joke fell flat. Soon, however, both were drinking with great relish, stopping at intervals to listen to the bursts of thunder and the pelting rain.

After a while the two men were left alone, the stolid barmaid being summoned away by a voice from a distant kitchen. Job pulled Nobson by the coat, beckoning him to the empty tap-room.

"Come in 'ere and let's 'ave a look at that there necktie."

"Anybody there?"

"No."

"Right you are, bring in the gargle."

Seated in the sanded tap-room, Nicky produced the necktie and pin, glancing nervously round like a thief.

"Dimonds!" was Job's first exclamation on catching sight of the pin.

"Dimonds? Glass, Job! 'Ere, you take the necktie, and I'll stick to the pin."

"Halves, mate," said Job, sullenly; "them's dimonds. I ain't sich a fool as you take me for."

"No, you're mighty cute, Job, you are. Perhaps you can tell me who it is about this neighbourhood as wears a pin like that."

"No, I can't."

"Becos I'm most anxious to give it back, I am; but arfter the gent's rude behaviour I don't think I shall trouble. It warn't a keeper as I collared, Job, was it? and that warn't a keeper's gun we found? The question is, who was it as wanted to hide his gun, and what for? That's what I want to know, Job."

"It's shootin'," said Job, in a half whisper, and with a half frightened look.

"I could ha' tole you that," said Nicky, testily. "S'welp me, Job, I do believe you're goin' dotty."

"It's shootin' men, I mean, Nicky. *Murder!*" and he dropped his voice lower still and glanced timidly around.

"Look 'ere, Job," said Nicky, grasping his pewter in a threatening manner, "drop it! d'ye hear? Your mind is a-running on that tack a bit too much to-night."

"Ay, and it'll run on it a good bit more."

Both men started to their feet in alarm, and Nicky thrust the necktie and pin into his pocket, for the outer door was suddenly burst open with a bang as some one hurriedly entered the bar for shelter. They could hear him breathing hard, as though he had been running, and stamping his feet and shaking the dripping rain from his hat.

Job slid along the bench to look through the crack of the door at the newcomer, but the man's back was turned. He could only see that he was dressed in broadcloth, with a light summer overcoat buttoned up to his chin, but the figure was familiar.

The barmaid returned to her post to serve the new customer.

"Give me some brandy," he gasped, "I'm wet through."

"Yes, sir."

The stolid barmaid became very energetic, and bustled out into the back room and whispered to somebody.

In a moment the fat landlady herself appeared, wiping her hands on her apron, intent upon serving the customer herself. He was evidently one of some importance, but her greeting was more civil than cordial.

"Good evening, sir, good evening. The rain is——"

"Never mind the rain, give me some brandy."

"Yes, sir, certainly. What brandy would you like?"

"Brandy, woman, brandy; any kind of brandy. I shall catch my death of cold."

"Yes, sir."

"Who is it, Job; do yer know 'im?" whispered Nicky to his friend, peering through the crack of the door.

"Yes, I know 'im," replied Job between his clenched teeth.

"Let's 'ave a look."

He pulled Job aside and took possession of the point of observation.

The gentleman in the bar was now facing in the direction of the tap-room door, with the light full on his pale face, and he thought he was alone, the bar being empty. He supported himself with one hand upon the leaden counter, while with the other he unbuttoned his coat. His face was ashen, and his eyes dilated as with the recollection of some recent terror.

"Looks for all the world like as if the coppers was on 'is

track, and not far behind neither," whispered Nicky. "I've seen that look afore now in the looking-glass."

The object of his scrutiny had by this time unbuttoned his coat from top to bottom.

Job felt himself suddenly clutched by his comrade.

"Look! look! look, Job!" whispered Nicky in suppressed excitement, making room for his friend to peep.

"Well, what?" asked the dull-witted Job, after a disappointed scrutiny.

"Can't yer see? Look again. Look at 'is neck."

"Can't see nothin'."

"Can't yer see, Job, *'is neoktie's gorn?*"

Job began to comprehend.

"It was 'is'n," he whispered. "It was 'is gun—the one what he shot——"

"Eh?"

"I'll tell you when he's gone, mate."

* * * * *

CHAPTER VI.

THE GUN! THE GUN!—THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT THE MURDER.

THE reader has no doubt guessed that it was Stephen Markham who murdered Eddie Wilde, and secreted the gun in Hazel Wood.

In his guilty fear he had put the weapon there, hardly knowing why, but impressed with a vague terror that it might, in some way, tell its own tale.

When, however, the rash statements in the dead man's diary gave credence to the theory of suicide, and the whole affair blew over, the murderer's naturally mean spirit prompted him to recover his gun. It was a good one, a useful one, a very expensive one.

On consideration he thought he had been very foolish to leave it there at all. Could a gun speak? Could it bear testimony against him?

No, he would recover it and use it again. What if murder had been done with it, were not all guns made for killing?

So he argued with himself, and went stealthily to regain it.

But now the gun had become a danger indeed. Two men had started out of the darkness, had tried to seize the weapon. There was a struggle, a shot, a cry from one of his assailants whom he had probably wounded—perhaps killed. Who and what were they, and what had he done?

After firing he had dashed away blindly into the thickness of the wood, grasping the gun in his hand, never stopping until he reached the far end of the wood. There he waited a moment, panting and listening to see if he were pursued.

The gun! the gun! That was his one thought. What should he do with it?

The summer lightning flickered through the trees and lighted up his pallid face, and the rain began to pour down out of the darkness.

The gun! the gun! He held the hateful thing in his hand! He thrust it hurriedly beneath the nearest bush and kicked it in as far as it would go. Then he listened again fearfully for sounds of his pursuers. No; only the rumbling thunder and the ghostly whispering rain. His legs shook under him, and his teeth chattered with superstitious fear.

Those two? Were they ghosts or evil spirits sent to terrify him? They had come out of the darkness before him just as the other two had done on the night of the dinner at the "Stag," and he had shot at them, and there was a loud cry just as there was when he had raised his gun in the darkness and shot young Eddie Wilde.

Which way should he turn? It was black darkness on every side except where, in the distance, a twinkling light relieved the gloom. Dare he go that way?

He dared not stay there in the darkness and the rain with the lightning flashing wierdly through the trees. He turned and hurried blindly across the open fields towards the distant light, never stopping to look back. As the storm increased, so his terror grew.

"Hanged! hanged! and I did it!" wailed a voice in the darkness, after a more than usually brilliant flash.

Two ghosts in the form of men again stood out grimly in the

sulphurous light. He heard their voices as they mocked him. He fancied, too, they were pursuing him.

Unspeakable terror—terror such as turns a man's hair grey in a single night—possessed him, and he fled away towards the light of the distant inn.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW EDDIE WILDE CAME BY HIS END—HIS MURDERER AND HIS METHODS.

MARKHAM had not meant to kill young Wilde. His gun had been raised to shoot another man, none other than Phil Raynor himself.

He had been at the dinner at the Stag Inn, given in honour of Phil's coming of age and the accession to the family estates, which he, Markham, had so long held as trustee.

At the dinner he had been insulted—yes, there was no other word for it—by some of the more daring spirits. They talked about him, and at him, and across him at the table, till he was thoroughly maddened by their barbed shafts; yet nothing was done or said that he could reasonably have repudiated.

What added to the smart of his humiliation was the fact that he knew that on the morrow he must render up to Phil, his new master, an account of the stewardship of the Chesfield estates, and that before another day passed Phil would *brand him as a felon*, and perform that unpleasant office, too, with the greatest satisfaction.

The fun at the dinner had waxed fast and furious, and the number of empty champagne and spirit bottles increased to an alarming extent.

The lawyer had not been pressed to drink much, and he kept a cool head; but he soon saw that the abstemious Phil Raynor was hopelessly inebriated by the mixture of liquids forced upon him. In his mind as he sat there he pictured the new squire of Chesfield staggering home in the darkness across the fields, intoxicated, helpless.

Like an inspiration fresh from hell there had flashed across the felon's mind the possibility of intercepting his new master on his way home, and silencing him for ever, thus gaining a short respite from the inevitable discovery of his embezzlements.

The idea came in an instant, and he grasped it at once. There was, he felt, no time to meditate. It would have to be done at once, or the opportunity would be lost, and his last chance gone.

Whilst the revellers were straining their lungs in cheering the toast of the "Rose of Ilchester" he stealthily left them, taking his gun and his cartridge case.

As he quietly slipped out he heard an altercation between Phil and his friend Eddie Wilde. Phil was insisting upon going home alone, and threatening to shoot anybody who opposed his will. Like most gentle and docile people, under the influence of drink he had become furious and reckless.

With swift footsteps Markham made his way along the footpath to the Bury Meadow, and stationed himself behind a hedge a few yards from the footpath along which Phil must pass on his way home.

Here, in the loneliness of the open fields and under cover of the night, he had waited with bated breath the coming of his unsuspecting victim.

All was still except a gentle rustling wind which swept past him in little gusts, cooling the heavy sweat which stood out in beads upon his forehead.

He waited awhile with chattering teeth, but no Phil made his appearance. The long minutes crept by slowly, oh, so slowly, and gave him time to think, to repent, to turn coward.

But he tried not to think; he clenched his teeth and grasped his double-barrelled gun with an iron grip, and would not allow himself to answer the taunts of conscience.

"*You dare not do it*," whispered conscience; "it is *murder!* Give it up and fly the country before it is too late."

He only gripped his gun the tighter and shut his ears.

"You may be *found out*, and then you will be in a much worse plight. Give it up, it is too desperate. You may not kill him, only wound him, and that would mean only a short respite."

His hands only clenched the gun—and, listen!

There is a sound of slow, heavy footsteps. Now is the time or never!

In another moment the approaching shadow will be passing along on the other side of the hedge right opposite to where he is kneeling.

He thrusts his gun through the hedge and levels it to his shoulder.

The footsteps are quite near now. In another moment he sees a moving figure before him and fires.

A muffled shot booms through the clammy night mist—a stifled gasp and a heavy fall, and the murderer knows his shot has taken effect.

But the next instant his heart stands still, for he hears the voice of the dying man cry feebly, "Phil, I'm shot!" and he knows it is Eddie Wilde he has slain.

He sees Phil's form stand swaying for a moment over his prostrate friend, then a lurch and a hideous drunken laugh, as the poor fellow, overcome by the fumes of the noxious drink, falls senseless beside his dying friend.

Terror took possession of the bungler murderer. The shot he had fired seemed to resound like a roar of cannonade. In his fear he imagined the whole countryside rushing to the spot in consternation.

With stealthy footsteps, at first slow, then faster and faster, he crept away, until he reached the stile at the edge of Hazel Wood. Next over the stile and down the footpath leading away through the wood to the high road.

He carried in his hand the heavy gun, and for a moment he felt that it was the gun and not he that had committed the awful blunder, and he wanted to get rid of it.

He was now nearing the gate leading to the road, and he feared to go out on to the highway with the weapon.

Dread prompted him to hide it, so he turned out of the footpath to a big thick bush looming in the blackness, and thrust the gun underneath it.

This done, back to the footpath again, listening all the while for the sound of pursuing footsteps, and from thence on to the road.

The road led straight away to his own house, which was soon reached, and once inside he breathed more freely.

With consummate cunning he pursued his ordinary house-

hold routine as though nothing unusual had happened. But when the inmates of the house retired to rest he cast aside the mask.

He was desperate now, and when he came to reason things out he cursed himself for a fool for not discharging the other barrel of his gun at Phil Raynor, thus accomplishing the task he had set himself to do.

He could not sleep, but as a precaution he undressed and went to bed like an innocent, peaceful citizen.

When the morning dawned he was up watching from his window. From it he could see the country for miles round, and in the distance the Bury Meadow quite plainly.

The morning mists were hanging over it, and at first he could distinguish nothing; but when the mists cleared in the early morning light *he saw distinctly two dark objects on the ground.*

Then one of them moved, and next he witnessed from afar off the scene which formed the first chapter of this story. He held his breath as he saw Phil stagger away from the dead body of the friend he supposed himself to have murdered.

Was he going to raise an alarm? thought the murderer.

But no, he did not make for the nearest habitation, but hurried away towards his house like a guilty thing.

Patiently the murderer watched from his window the development of events. No help came from Chesfield Hall, whither Phil had gone, and he was puzzled.

What was the meaning of it? Why did not young Raynor bring help to his friend?

With a flash the truth rushed upon him, and sent a thrill of relief to his guilty heart. He realised that Phil Raynor, awaking from a drunken sleep and finding himself beside the dead body of his friend, must have imagined himself in some way accountable for his death.

When, after two hours' watching, Markham saw the dead body discovered by a labourer going to work, and others hurrying to the scene within a few minutes, his conclusions were strengthened. Then came the inquest and telegrams flying to America, where Eddie's relations were, and by the irony of fate Mr. Stephen Markham, solicitor, and one of the dead man's bitterest enemies, was deputed by a distant relation

to watch the case on behalf of the deceased's family. The reader knows the rest—how at the inquest Phil's strange emotion and the falsehood he told about the time of parting with his friend, confirmed Markham's suspicion that the new squire really believed himself the murderer.

In another's error the crafty villain saw his own escape. At any time he could put suspicion upon Phil, and he meant to do it if his own neck were in danger.

CHAPTER VIII.

PAULINE AND HER FATHER—A QUARREL AND A TRAGEDY.

JUST as the hard truths of life are stranger than fiction, so the coincidences of life defy invention. At about the same time that our loquacious friend Nobson took the spent shot from his fellow-poacher's boot, telling him to keep it for luck, another person was handling and examining a spent shot, exactly similar in appearance, weight, and bore, turning it over in his fingers and looking at it thoughtfully. But there all similarity ended, for whereas the shot in Job Cassidy's possession had spent itself harmlessly, the other had brought to a sudden termination a young and promising life.

It was Dr. Chester, Pauline's father, who held the missile in his hand. It was lying in his open palm, and he was looking at it by the light of his consulting-room lamp. The shot was the one that had put an end to the life of Eddie Wilde.

It was in this room, with its cosy armchairs and shelves of books, that the motherless Pauline loved to sit in the evening with the father she idolised.

The doctor to-night was alone, and as he held the fatal shot under the light of the lamp his face was grave and perplexed. He adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles two or three times, and turned the missile over and over.

"An ugly-looking shot," he murmured, "an ugly shot to be in a man's gun out partridge-shooting. Why, one would almost be inclined to call that a bullet. I am no sportsman, but I don't

think that is the usual thing for partridges. How absurd of me not to have noticed the fact before the inquest! Poor fellow! he must have meditated the act very deliberately to have loaded his gun with a thing like that. And yet I cannot think he meant to shoot himself. And the diary? True, the wording was very wild and pointed to suicide, and yet—I must look at it again."

He took from a side drawer the little pocket diary and read the memorable entries.

Then he turned back some few months and read the entries there. The first one that caught his eye was this—

"July 5th.

"I think I must be in love with Pauline, but I cannot tell her. There is something so simple and stately about her, that I feel a fool in her company. She is too good for a chap like me. I feel afraid of her."

"Poor fellow! poor fellow!" murmured the agitated father, as tears filled his eyes. He could not help feeling proud of his beautiful daughter—proud to think that his Pauline possessed the power to sway men's destinies even to the brink of the grave.

Somehow Dr. Chester did not feel too kindly disposed towards Philip Raynor this evening. Was Phil worthy of her? he asked himself, and asked in vain. Then he turned again to the written pages. "Ah, here is one of the entries I can't understand.

"January 10th.

"'Raining—raining all day, and yesterday, and the day before. Can't hunt, can't do anything. I think the best thing I can do is to shoot myself, or somebody else, by way of excitement.'

"Strange," muttered the doctor, as his thoughts wandered on; "that expression occurs over and over again, and is most palpably not the expression of a man predisposed to suicide, but rather that of a thoughtless, reckless youth of changeable mood. How strange that the former entries should have been overlooked at the inquest. Yet—yet it might have been un-

pleasant for Philip. He was placed in a very awkward position by the action of his friend, and—Pshaw! it could never have come to that—Pauline's affianced husband in the dock for murder! No, it is too horrible to think of!"

He put the little diary back into the drawer, and again took the shot to the lamp.

At that moment Pauline entered the room, but so quietly that her entry was unobserved. The doctor was lost in contemplation of the object in his hand.

He turned to look at her as she came to his side, and noticed that her face was pale and her eyes showed signs of recent weeping.

"What is that, father?" she asked, quietly, looking at the object in the doctor's open palm.

"Nothing, Pauline; nothing," he replied, turning away from her and dropping the little piece of lead into a brass ash-tray on the mantelshelf.

"It sounds like metal," said the inquisitive girl, taking up the ash-tray and picking out the shot. "Why, it is—what is it?" she asked, looking up into her father's face with a half smile.

"It is the shot which killed your disappointed lover, Eddie Wilde," said the doctor, gravely.

"She gave a gasp and a frightened cry and dropped the sinister thing into the tray.

"Father, why did you let me touch it?" she cried. "Why did you not tell me? How horrible! *horrible!*"

"I am glad you appreciate the awfulness of it, Pauline," he said; "it is indeed a terrible thing for a man to shed his blood for love of a woman."

Pauline struggled with her feelings for a moment, then dropped into one of the spacious armchairs, and burst into tears.

"Oh, it was horrible! horrible!" she cried, passionately. "People stare at me, and point at me in the streets, as though it were my fault. And Phil, too—he is utterly wretched and changed. It has altered his love for me or—or something," she sobbed.

"I would to heaven it had, Pauline," said the doctor with unwonted fervour. "I—I don't think as much of Philip as I did."

"Father!" cried the astonished girl in a tone of reproof.

"I didn't like the way he gave his evidence at the inquest. And when informed that his friend's dead body had been found, I am told that he did not seem at all concerned. He did not even leave his home till called to the inquest. It was very strange behaviour, and people, you know, will talk?"

"But, father, did you not see him at the inquest absolutely stunned with grief?"

"Yes, yes, certainly he did seem upset, poor fellow, but then——"

"Then what, father? Do not harbour unjust thoughts against him? Tell me?"

"Well, I fancied—that is to say——" The doctor halted awkwardly.

"Tell me?"

"Well, it was a most unpleasant fancy, and no doubt an unjust one, but somehow, much as I regret to say so, it seemed to me that—*that he was not speaking the truth!*"

"Father, how dare you!" cried Pauline, starting to her feet, her eyes flashing with anger and her bosom heaving tumultuously.

"There, there, Pauline, don't be angry with me," faltered the fond father with just a suspicion of a gulp in his throat. Pauline had never spoken to him like this before. "I said it was unjust, but—but I go about a great deal more than you do, and I hear what idle gossips say; and——"

"You know your suspicion is false," she said, haughtily, her lips quivering with scorn and her eyes flashing.

Dr. Chester looked at her in the dim light of the shaded lamp and felt proud of his daughter; and yet, so strange are human contradictions, angry with himself for being afraid of his own child.

"I only stated it as a fancy, Pauline; I did not say it as a fact," he proceeded. "Mr. Markham, who very kindly called this morning to inquire whether you had suffered from the ill effects of the painful events of the last few days, informed me that the same fancy occurred to him, and but for the interference of the coroner, he would have felt it his duty, on behalf of the relatives of the deceased whom he represented in his capacity as solicitor, to put some rather awkward questions to Philip."

"What questions?" demanded Pauline, imperiously.

"Tut! tut! child, don't speak to me like that," said the doctor, somewhat nettled by her tone.

"Father, do you not know what it is to love? Do you know what it is to have one you love slandered! It is worse than if you slandered me!"

"Slandered, my child? Be reasonable!"

"It is slander, I tell you, to hint at such a thing—base slander. If the whole world called him liar I would defend his integrity. I know he is the soul of honour."

"Yes, yes, my child. It is not a question of honour, Pauline; merely unusual conduct, merely——"

"Father, you are prejudiced against him because he loves me. You—you are jealous of him," she cried, passionately.

"Pauline! Pauline!" exclaimed the old man, piteously, touched to the quick. The impulsive daughter had hit hard and struck home. "Pauline, I only desire your happiness."

Pauline, a little calmed, but with her pulses still throbbing violently, began to cry silently, and there was a painful pause.

"Hot tears, too, were falling from the fond father's eyes; one hand was pressed to his heart, and he supported himself feebly against the table with the other, as he half sobbed, half whispered, "Pauline, I didn't mean to——"

She saw his tears, and her passion melted like early snow. Never had she seen him thus moved. Her anger recoiled upon herself.

"Father, father, forgive me," she cried.

He extended his trembling hands and enfolded her to his bosom.

"Father, I ought not to have spoken so. I am sorry, so sorry! Everything seems to have gone wrong to-day."

"Never mind, my child. I am getting old and feeble; I am unreasonable. You are all that is left to me, and I am apt to think that nobody is good enough for you; for I am very proud of you, Pauline. I could not live without you, my child. There, there! sit down beside me on the hassock, as you used to, and you shall read me something from a cheerful book, and—and we'll forget all unpleasantness."

"Yes, father."

She sat herself on a low hassock by his side, with a book

upon her lap, and her head resting wearily upon the arm of his favourite chair.

The old man rested peacefully, with his head thrown back, his hands clasped on his lap, and his eyes shut, as though he were about to sleep. But Pauline did not read. She turned over the pages idly, fixing at last upon one, but not seeing a word of the text; only thinking—thinking of him who was to her all the world—her life.

The clock ticked on the mantelshelf, and the old man seemed to doze, in spite of the storm rumbling without. Even the thunder did not wake him; he slumbered peacefully on. It was not until that fearful crash which shook the heavens and so scared the poachers leaving the wood that she became alarmed, and tried to waken the sleeper for company.

She touched him gently. There was no response. She shook him by the arm, but he did not move. She started to her feet, and looked into his face. An ashen pallor had o'erspread it.

"Father! father!" she shrieked. But the cold clay was still in death. She shook him again, and cried aloud for help. Vain her fears, vain her cries: she could not call him back from the great unknown. Dr. Chester was dead, and Pauline alone in the world.

CHAPTER IX.

PHIL RAYNOR'S MOST VULNERABLE POINT—PUTTING ON THE SCREW—A DASTARDLY REVENGE—CORNERED.

A COMMON trait in the nature of cowards is an extraordinary desire to make others suffer. For personal gratification they inflict pain, and from the miserable sense of power so acquired derive some satisfaction incomprehensible to natural minds. Markham realised his influence over Phil was supreme; but, not content to use it for his own protection, he must needs seek new ways to assure himself of his complete mastery. Frequently he found it necessary to cheer his doubting spirit

by a private outburst of spleen. He availed himself of an occasional opportunity of spurning his fallen enemy to see what show of fight there still remained in him. Besides, he had not forgotten that physical encounter on the morning after the inquest when Phil nearly throttled him.

Phil's most vulnerable point was his love for Pauline, and Markham realised this. But for her he knew full well Phil would not remain a day longer in Ilchester; and by degrees the contemplation of Phil's possible absence from the scene of action aroused in the half-hearted rogue a very healthy desire to see the back of his conscience-stricken victim. Once get him away and the ground would be fairly clear; but while the situation remained undeveloped as at present the smouldering fire might at any moment start a conflagration.

Accordingly it was not without a certain complacent satisfaction that Markham set to work to separate the lovers. It was cruel, but to his liking; it would convince the haughty youngster that he, Markham, was not one to threaten idly or dominate feebly. There was no refinement about his method, it was simple and brutal.

* * * * *

Phil Raynor sat in the old oak room of Chesfield Hall. Before him were pen and paper, on the table a lamp, a box of cigars, a decanter and glasses, which the brand new butler had just brought in. He was trying to delude himself into the belief that he was comfortably ensconced at home, but as he glanced round he felt that at any moment the door might open and some strange individual force his way in, demanding admittance in the Queen's name to claim him for the gallows.

His plight was truly pitiable. You may feel, gentle reader, that you quite realise his position, and that you know exactly what would have been the wisest course for him to pursue. But, not being in his shoes, you are able to calmly reason out what would have been discreet and honourable under the circumstances.

One thing followed upon another so rapidly that his brain was in a whirl, and it awakened in him no surprise when he saw the door open and Markham shown into the room.

It did not even occur to him that it was a strange hour for

a visit, or that his servant might have announced the visitor more formally. He only felt a fear, such as the best of us feel in the presence of a loathsome reptile.

"What do you want with me?" he asked, curtly.

"Business."

"What business?"

"Delicate business, my young friend; in fact, I may perhaps best describe it as '*that* business.'"

"Why do you want to refer to that? I suppose it is money you want. You are going to add blackmailing to your other accomplishments. Is it not enough to be a common thief without——?"

"Drop that, you young fool," snarled Markham, advancing swiftly to the table. "Is a thief worse than a murderer? Ah, you soon knuckle under when I remind you——"

"Hush, man, hush!"

"Ah! you see I have you under my thumb, my lordly young friend, and I shall not spare you. I have other reasons for calling. I intend that you shall have a great deal of my pleasant society. I mean to stick to you like a leech. I shall crush you, humble you, till you grovel for mercy. But I shall do it in a friendly way. I shall look after your wealth, for instance, for fear it should be forfeit to the Crown, and beyond that I mean to protect you socially. I mean to see that you do not marry an innocent girl."

"Hold! Rob me if you like, blackmail me, torture me if you will, I deserve it; but interfere with me there and I may kill you."

"Be calm, my young friend; be calm! I can take care of myself."

"The mention of Pauline Chester by your lips is worse than blasphemy."

"And from a murderer's lips worse than—what? Supply a fitting word from your vocabulary."

Each time the hateful taunt of murderer escaped the torturer's lips Phil staggered as from a blow. He sank into a chair defeated and despondent.

"What do you mean to do with me? I know there is a motive in your devilry. Tell me what it is. Let me know the worst."

"What would be the worst, I wonder?" said the lawyer, softly, as he dropped into a comfortable armchair and clasped his hands upon his lap. "Perhaps you would like me to tell Miss Chester what I know? Would that be the worst?"

"For heaven's sake, man, do what you like, take what you like, but spare me that."

"There is only one way it can be done. You know what that is?"

"What do you mean?"

"Give her up altogether."

Phil gave a convulsive gasp. In an undefined way he had arrived at the same resolve, but dare not confess it to himself.

"You know it is the right thing to do, and I intend that you shall do it."

He produced a folded letter from his pocket and spread it out on the table before the astonished man.

"Here is a short letter I have prepared for your signature. I knew it would surprise you, but then a person in your position can scarcely be surprised at anything."

Phil looked upon the document, and read with starting eyes its cunning, brutal portent.

"DEAR PAULINE,—I have instructed my lawyer to write this letter to you because I feel I cannot write it myself. My feelings towards you have changed for reasons I cannot specify, and that being the case you will agree that it will be better for us to part. I know I am performing a heartless and unchivalrous act, but I am willing to make what reparation I can. I have instructed my friend Mr. Markham to pay over to you such a sum of money as he considers reasonable damages for my heartless conduct. Do not write to me or attempt to see me. *Nothing can alter my decision.* Good-bye.

"Yours faithlessly,

"——."

"No, not that," he almost shrieked, "in heaven's name not that! not that about the money. It is brutal, it will kill her."

"Sign," said Markham, coldly.

"But, man, think! Be merciful to—to her."

"Sign it," I say.

"I will not sign; I would rather die."

"Upon the gallows? Would she like that better?"

"But, Markham, I implore you—let me write a letter, my own letter——"

Phil was desperate now, wild-eyed and despairing.

"Sign that, I tell you, or I go straight from here to Miss Chester. I do not relish the secret I hold. I am anxious to be rid of it."

"I cannot sign that," exclaimed the agonised youth, with a shudder of repulsion. "I will forge, or lie, or steal, or murder, but I cannot sign that."

"Then I go to Miss Chester," said Markham, taking up his hat and the letter very calmly. "I will tell her what I know, and what you have confessed to me; and I will tell her that she may shortly have the satisfaction of knowing that her lover will swing upon the gallows. That is your wish? That is the cheerful alternative you choose for the woman you pretend to love."

"Give me time," Phil moaned, "give me time."

A wicked light danced in the lawyer's ferret eyes as his proud enemy descended from his contemptuous eminence to pitiful supplication.

"I give no alternative," said Markham, returning to the table and throwing down the letter.

An overpowering sense of helplessness overcame Phil, and he flung himself into a chair and dropped his head on his hands.

"Come, sign," said Markham, taking up a pen lying on the table.

No answer from the prostrate youth.

The torturer stood over his victim, pen in hand, waiting stoically, a leer of satisfaction upon his face.

The moments went by, but Phil did not move.

"Come, sign. Do you hear?"

Again a long silence.

"For the last time I advise you. It is for the girl's own good—can't you see that? Better a broken than a breaking heart; she will the sooner get over it."

Markham thrust the pen into the hand that was thrown out on the table, and pushed the letter nearer.

"It is your last chance. Unless I take that letter away with me signed by you, you will to-night be arrested for murder."

Slowly and reluctantly he signed. When he had done he laid down the pen and looked his triumphant torturer full in the face. Markham shivered; the room seemed to become ghostly and still. He tried to speak as the letter was handed to him by Phil with a strange deliberation.

"You have now done your worst," said Phil, in a hollow voice, looking his persecutor straight in the eyes. "I will reckon with you later."

Markham's hand shook as he took the letter, and he felt afraid. Phil pointed to the door.

"Now go."

CHAPTER X.

PAULINE'S GRIEF—THE FALSE LETTER DELIVERED—SUFFICIENT FOR THE DAY.

In an upper room of his quiet home, stretched out upon a snowy bed, lies the lifeless figure of Dr. Chester.

Loving hands have placed flowers on his pillow, and tender fingers have smoothed the silvery ripples of his hair. His pale, calm face seems but a shade paler than it did in the days of life; his hair is as soft as ever; but he does not rest as in sleep. There is finality in that smile—peace upon that placid forehead.

Beside the bed the orphaned Pauline kneels and weeps.

Bending over Pauline with one arm round her trembling frame is a homely woman in a print dress—Martha, the faithful servant of the family since Pauline's birth.

"Come away, miss, come away," says Martha, trying to lift the prostrate girl with one strong red arm, while with the other she dashes the tears from her own eyes. "Come away, missy, do. You can't do no good by stopping here and

carrying on so dreadful. What must be, has got to be, and it's no use crying all day and all night."

"Let me stay, Martha, let me stay," sobs Pauline, hysterically. "Let me be with him. They shall not take him away."

"Oh, miss, don't carry on so, you'll be ill. You've been here all day, and it's getting dark, and you've had no food. Do come away, Miss Pauline."

"No, no; let me be!"

Good Martha sank on her knees beside her young mistress, and, entwining her arm about the girl's waist, gave way to helpless grief.

"Oh, miss, whatever shall we do now he's gone, and you with no mother too. Bear up, Miss Pauline, bear up. I feel for you—oh, don't sob so, you're shaking all over. Miss Pauline, don't—ah, she's fainted!"

The exhausted, despairing girl sank in the faithful servant's arms.

Tenderly Martha ministered to her, at last carrying the unconscious girl in her strong arms to her own room. There she laid her precious burden gently upon the bed, and, as in the days of Pauline's childhood, she caressed the girl's wayward hair, and hushed her to sleep. Lulled by the familiar tenderness, the motherless, fatherless child closed her weary eyes for a while in the oblivion of dreamless sleep.

Up to that time the household had not been troubled by any visitors save the medical men, who had found their old colleague beyond their skill; but now a fresh figure appeared upon the scene.

Mr. Markham, dressed in solemn garb, arrived at the front door and wished to see Miss Pauline "on business."

"Miss Pauline ain't in a fit state to be seen on business," replied Martha, curtly; "any one with sense might have known that."

There was a set smile of mock humility and gentleness upon the man's face which offended the short-tempered servant. A smile of any kind at such a time was in Martha's opinion an insult to the household.

"Your tongue is rather free, young woman," said Mr. Markham, patronisingly.

'My tongue is my own, and I'm not a young woman," replied the buxom Martha, stoutly.

"Never mind, you were *once*, I suppose, and perhaps you were more civil in those days. I have come to take possession of the deceased doctor's papers and effects. As executor under his will I take possession of everything."

"'Secutor or no 'secutor, you don't take possession of nothing while I'm here."

"Nonsense, woman, let me pass!"

Martha would have slammed the door in the lawyer's face had not the medical man, who had been in attendance at the house, come up in time to explain matters.

With a very bad grace Martha delivered up the keys of everything. She would not have done so, however, had not the crafty lawyer insinuated that she must have some private and dishonest reason for retaining them.

That was too much for the servant of twenty years' standing. She expressed her sense of indignation by going round the house collecting the keys of all the rooms and cupboards, not excluding even the dirty key of the coal-cellar door. These she flung down in a heap before the astonished man.

"There!" she exclaimed, "perhaps you'd like to search my box as well?"

"Not at present, thank you," replied Markham, sweetly, "but you may as well find the key, in case there is anything missing and we have to rifle it."

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed, and as her vocabulary contained no more comforting expletives she flounced out of the room "wondering what the world was a-coming to."

On her way upstairs to unburden her heart to her young mistress she met the doctor coming down.

"Miss Chester is not at all well," he said; "she is very exhausted. You must undress her and put her to bed, and see that she does not leave her room."

"Yes, sir," said Martha, her tears beginning afresh.

"Don't let her see anybody—do you hear?—anybody."

"Yes, sir."

"She must not see the coroner's officials or the jurymen or any of the people who will come here to-morrow; you understand?"

"Lor, sir, what do they want a hinquest for? He died peaceful and quiet enough, I'm sure."

"Ah, never mind that. Look after your young mistress. She will need all your care. Remember, she is to see no one."

"Not—not Mr. Raynor, sir? She'd be calmer like with him, sir."

A curious flush passed over the doctor's face, and Martha remembered that he was the young medical man who was in love with Miss Pauline last year, who had proposed and been rejected, and "bore it like a lamb he did," as she had expressed it at the time.

"Yes, let Mr. Raynor see her—if she desires it, but not otherwise."

"I'll send for him at once, sir."

"Do nothing of the sort. He would have been here before now if he thought it wise to come. He has received intimation of the sad occurrence, and as he has not called, do nothing without your mistress's orders."

"Very well, sir. Excuse me, sir, but is it the correct thing for the 'secutor to open everything and turn over all poor master's papers which has always been kep' so private?"

"I'm afraid it is the correct legal procedure, Martha."

"Well, then, all I can say is, as the law wants changing," said Martha.

"Or the lawyer," muttered young Dr. Marsh, as he softly descended the stairs and entered the half-darkened room where Dr. Chester had died and Markham was now busily engaged turning out the contents of a writing desk.

"Looking for the will?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, no, I have that. Strangely enough, it was only signed yesterday morning."

"He appointed you his executor, I understand?"

"Yes, your bill will be all right, you'll be paid."

Dr. Marsh bit his lip with vexation and turned upon his heel. As he left the room he muttered something under his breath about somebody being a cad; but the lawyer did not hear it, and perhaps it would not have hurt him if he had.

The writing desk which Markham was rifling was not Dr. Chester's, but Pauline's, and the lawyer knew it. It was half filled with letters, nearly all from one person. On the envelope

of each was the familiar superscription in Phil's bold handwriting.

As the lawyer sneeringly turned them over one after another, he felt in his pocket for the letter he had forced Phil to sign, just to assure himself that it was all right.

At last he came upon a letter in the desk, the envelope of which was intact. The envelope had been opened without tearing it. The crafty lawyer extracted the letter from this, and, taking the fatal missive from his pocket slipped it into the envelope bearing Phil's handwriting.

"It will look more natural and convincing," said the schemer, as he sealed the envelope. "I could never have trusted him to write a sufficiently brutal letter; but I ought to have got him to address the envelope."

He put the sealed letter back in his pocket, and proceeded to rummage the desk out of pure curiosity.

"What are you doing with my letters?" said a still, clear voice from out of the darkness of the room.

He started guiltily, and looked up in alarm. Pauline, attired in a loose dressing gown, with her hair down over her shoulders and her face deathly white, stood beside him.

"A—a thousand pardons, Miss Chester; I was not aware they were your letters. I thought they were your father's."

"And if they were, what right have you to touch his things without my permission?"

"I am his lawyer, and as his executor it is my first duty."

"Ah, I beg your pardon," said Pauline, feebly. "I understand. Would you be so kind as to hand me that writing-case? I wish to send a note to the only friend I have in the world now."

"Miss Chester, I hope you will always look upon me as your friend."

"Yes—yes, thank you; but I wish to write a note to Mr. Raynor."

"I would not if I were you, Miss Chester. I have a note for you from him which he dictated to me last night."

"Dictated?"

"Yes," said Markham, awkwardly fumbling in his pocket and producing the brutal letter the poor fellow had been forced to sign at peril of his life. "Here it is."

"Thank you," said Pauline, grasping the letter with trembling hand and pressing it to her throbbing bosom. With the other hand she thrust aside the luxuriant hair falling over her eyes. Markham thought he had never seen her look so fragile and so beautiful. He even repented for a moment the brutal device cunningly planned to sever at one blow the happiness of his victim.

When she turned and left him, returning to her own room, he felt very uncomfortable.

"Perhaps the poor girl will feel it more than he," he muttered, half relenting. "Heaven knows I have no ill will for her."

Then he laughed a nervous little laugh, and counted the minutes, reckoning up the time it would take her to read it.

"I didn't mean her to have this double blow, both the father and the lover lost at the same time, but—— Faugh! how could any woman seriously care for a young upstart like that? How I hate him! It seems to me that everybody ought to hate him too; but they don't. Everybody hates me. Why should I spare him or anybody else? Bah! why shouldn't I hate him? I will revenge myself for all the slights and ridicule he and his cursed friend have heaped upon me here to make me the laughing stock of the town. But they shall fear me yet. I will gain money and power and rule this place. I will pay off all old scores, and when I have humbled that young cub to my heart's content, I will get him out of the country. Yes, it will be safer so—safer for me. Best not to have that hanging over me. And that gun!"

He felt a cold shiver run through him, and though it was light outside, the blinds being drawn, the room was almost dark, and he felt afraid.

How still the house was. The servants below were moving with muffled tread hushed in the presence of death. He could distinctly hear the ticking of the clocks all over the house.

Suddenly a wild shriek rang out from an upper room, then another, followed by a heavy fall.

"She's read it!" gasped Markham, catching his breath, and starting to his feet trembling and conscience-stricken. Even he, soulless cur that he was, felt a thrill of pity. That shriek

was one of supreme agony, the cry of a wounded, defenceless creature mercilessly struck.

They found her lying senseless on her face, holding a crushed letter in her hand so tightly that it could not be wrested from the clenched fingers without tearing it.

Markham listened to the hurried footsteps and anxious voices of the household, as they hurried backwards and forwards, but he proffered no help. Like the coward that he was, he slunk quietly out of the house, feeling for once in his life that "sufficient for the day was the evil thereof."

CHAPTER XI.

PAULINE SINKS UNDER HER TROUBLE, BUT STARTLES MARKHAM IN HER RAVINGS.

THE inquest on the death of Dr. Chester is passed, and his remains are carried to the grave, but Pauline knows nothing of it. The blow so fully struck at her happiness and the sudden death of her father together have rendered her helpless.

Martha found her lying senseless, and for a long time all efforts to revive her were unavailing. At length Dr. Marsh arrived upon the scene.

"I left instructions that she should be put to bed at once," he whispered half angrily to Martha; "how is it that I find her up?"

"She was a-bed a few minutes ago, sir, but she must have got up again and put on her dressing-gown."

"What is that in her hand: a letter? Take it from her gently. You say she screamed and you heard a fall?"

"Yes, sir, a most dreadful scream as sent my blood cold. She must have seen a ghost or something."

"Nonsense. This letter has something to do with it. It is no business of ours to read it. Take care of it till she asks for it again. Take off her gown and put her to bed; she is coming to. I shall be downstairs if I am wanted."

With willing hands Martha disrobed her young mistress and put her to bed, where she remained in a half-stunned condition all that day and part of the next.

Kind friends without end called to see Miss Chester and condole with her, but one and all were strictly denied an audience. There were well-meaning friends who called and left polite notes, others from a distance sent telegrams. Several called chiefly with the object of discovering how much a yard dear Pauline proposed paying for her mourning dresses; she would look so well in black, and there was a lovely little bonnet down the town at Simpkinson's that would be the very thing, &c. One and all found the door shut upon them, and not a few went away in great indignation, expressing their contempt for "that young Mr. Marsh" who had charge of the late doctor's practice.

One person only, with delicate feeling, brought her a bunch of sweet, fresh flowers; that person was Jimmy, the diminutive youth who served in the dual capacity of page and errand boy to the doctor's household. Martha, who now rarely left the bedside of her young mistress, was disturbed by a very gentle tapping at the door, and on opening it discovered Jimmy outside holding a bunch of flowers nearly as big as his head. He motioned mysteriously to Martha to stoop down that he might whisper to her.

"How is she, Martha?" he asked.

"I think she's asleep. Don't whisper in my ear as if you wanted to blow my head off. What do you want?"

"Th—these," he spluttered, thrusting the flowers into her hand and turning quickly away, as if he had done something wrong, at the same moment bursting out into a muffled sob as he hurried down the stairs.

"Here, Jimmy, come back. What are they for? Who are they from?" whispered Martha from the top of the stairs.

Jimmy stopped on the stairs, surprised and hurt. He looked back with offended dignity.

"They're from me o' course."

"Oh!"

Jimmy's grief was checked for the moment by his indignation. He strutted away with his head in the air, muttering, "Thinks I ain't big enough to have any 'art, I suppose; but I

have, and anybody what says I ain't I'll let 'em know it." After which lucid and grammatical statement he buried himself in a small pantry and ferociously attacked the first pair of boots that came to hand, dropping tears all over them, and discovering as soon as he could see out of his eyes that he had blacked the coachman's boots all over the part that should have been pipe-clayed.

"It's no good," he moaned, as he dropped the brushes; "I'm gone all wrong—everything's gone all wrong. I've bin and put the blacking on the shining-brush. I shall be a-blacking my own face in a minute and polishing the bottle."

Jimmy was rather a character. No one knew how old he was—or how young. He had the form of a lad with the manners of an old man, and though he declared himself to be twenty years of age, other people fixed his years at fifteen.

Anyway, Jimmy was an oddity, with a smart tongue and a soft heart. He had been in the doctor's service some years, and seemed to have grown not the least bit older during that period. He considered himself on an equality with the coachman, and knew as much about dispensing as a good many doctor's assistants. His failing was a weakness for the fair sex. His young mistress he adored with a hopeless love that was sometimes comic. He had even been known in amorous moments to make love to the substantial Martha, with the aid of the kitchen table to enable him to reach her comfortable waist. His present of flowers, however, was intended more as an expression of sympathy than mere adoration.

Martha took the flowers into her young mistress's room, walking on tiptoe. To her astonishment, Pauline was sitting up in bed wide awake, with sparkling eyes and burning cheeks.

"What lovely flowers, Martha! Did father pick them for me?"

Martha stared aghast at the joyful light in the girl's eyes.

"Your father, miss?"

"Ah, I know he did. Bring them here, Martha, and spread them out on the bed, and we will play shops, and you will come in and buy and be a grand gentleman, and I will sell you a buttonhole, and—— Ah, what is the matter with you, Martha? Why do you look at me like that?"

"Poor, dear missy, she thinks she's a little girl again, grief has turned her brain," cried Martha in distress. "Lie down, Miss Pauline, lie down and sleep."

"I won't. I am going to father to tell him his flowers are all dying. Look at them all going smaller and smaller. Where are they? You have taken them away."

"No, I haven't, miss. There they are."

"They are not. You are not telling the truth. Where is father?"

"He's gone, miss. Can't you remember—gone?"

"Gone!" shrieked Pauline, grasping the frightened woman's arm. "Gone? You have taken him away!"

"Lor, missy, do be calm," sobbed Martha. "You're not right in your head. I can't bring him back; I wish I could."

"Tell me where he is, then. Do you hear?" she cried, shaking her by the arm with all the strength of youth. "Tell me or I will kill you. Why do you glare at me like that? Why does the ceiling press down on my head like that? Don't hold me, I tell you; it will crush us both in a minute. Let me go! Jump out of the window with me and we shall be saved. Take your hands off my throat!"

"I'm not touching you, miss, I'm not indeed," cried Martha, piteously.

"You are. What are these people round my bed? Send them away."

"All right, Miss Pauline."

"Ah, look! look!" shrieked the demented girl, pointing to a corner of the room; "look, there is Phil with a rope round his neck. They are going to hang him and he is calling for me. Let me go! Let me go, you horrible woman! Let me go to Phil!"

"He's not here, miss; he's not, I assure you."

"And who are you? Ah, you're Martha. I know you. Where is mother?"

"She's gone, miss."

"Bring her back. Do you hear? Bring her back at once!"

"I can't, miss. Oh, don't look at me like that, you make my blood run cold."

"Don't touch me or I will cry for help. I hate you! Help! help!"

"What is the matter?" asked the calm voice of Dr. Marsh as he entered the room.

The presence of the doctor calmed her a little.

"Take her away," gasped Pauline, pointing to Martha. "Tell mother to send her off. I hate her!"

"Oh, Miss Pauline, don't," wailed poor Martha, wringing her hands.

"Yes, yes, that's all right; we'll send her away presently; she's a bad woman," said the young doctor.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the astonished Martha, brindling up astonished and indignant.

"Hush! Don't you understand? Humour her," said the doctor.

"What are you whispering about?" asked Pauline, suspiciously. "I know you. You want to marry me. You are Eddie. What are you doing with that gun? Ah, take it away from him!" she shrieked, leaping up in bed; "he is going to shoot himself!"

"Yes, yes; that doesn't matter. Lie down and be quiet."

"Where's father?"

"He's out. Lie down and be quiet, or he will be angry."

"I am quite good," said Pauline, with sudden childlike obedience. "You won't tell father, will you?"

"Not if you go to sleep."

"I can't go to sleep. I hear voices outside. What are they saying? I can hear Phil telling them to take me away. He does not want me! He does not love me! Hark! They are coming up the stairs."

At a bound she leapt from the bed towards the window, which was in the front of the house, and before they realised what had happened she had thrown open the lattice and was leaning half-way out.

"Look! look! there he is—there is the murderer!" she shrieked, pointing to a man who was at that moment entering the front gate. The man thus alluded to looked up with a scared, white face. It was Stephen Markham.

They pulled her back into the room, and Jimmy below admitted Markham.

"What is the matter upstairs?" he asked, with shaking voice.

"The young missus is going on orful, sir."

"Who has been here to see her?" gasped Markham.

"Only Dr. Marsh, sir."

"You're a liar!" Markham blurted out, looking round with his ferret eyes as though expecting a figure to dart out of the shadows and arrest him.

"You're another," replied Jimmy, drawing himself up to full height, such as it was, and inflating his chest till it seemed about to burst, while all the little round buttons down the front of his coat oscillated in a most imposing manner.

"Only a little delirium," said Dr. Marsh, coming down in time to prevent a further passage of arms. "Miss Chester is rapidly developing brain fever. The death of her father, and some other trouble of which I know nothing, have together quite unstrung her."

Markham felt relieved, but the quick eye of the doctor noticed that he was considerably agitated.

"Pauline's accusation of murderer, instead of surprising him, seems to have thoroughly frightened him," thought Dr. Marsh. "Never saw a man look more startled."

It was not only Pauline's delirious raving that had alarmed the guilty man. As he came along the street a few minutes before he had been startled by a rough-looking man, who came up to him and shook his fist in his face, muttering some incoherent words. The aggressor was hopelessly drunk, but the lawyer's quick eyes saw that he was wearing a rich silk necktie of a particular pattern. It was the only respectable piece of wearing apparel the man had on, and stood out with undue prominence. Markham recognised it at once as his own—the one he had lost in the struggle that night in Hazel Wood. Before he had time to recognise the blear-eyed drunkard as Job Cassidy another man, with his hat drawn down over his eyes, came up, and, pulling the drunkard aside, hurried him away.

The murderer dared not look back. In guilty fear he hurried on, reasoning out the when and the how, the probabilities and the possibilities of the strange man's behaviour—what it could mean, and how he became possessed of the incriminating necktie. Imagine, then, his state of nervous agitation as he entered the gate of the Chesters' house, and

his feelings when he heard himself wildly assailed by Pauline's meaningless delirious cry of "Murderer!" can more readily be understood than described.

His position was not so safe as he had imagined. At every turn something happened to remind him of his crime. His cowardly fear magnified things until the habit of looking nervously behind him at every few steps grew upon him. His profession brought him frequently in touch with the police, and he fancied at times that they looked at him stealthily out of the corners of their eyes. When they whispered together his guilty mind conjectured that he formed the subject of their consultations. Like the cowardly schoolboy who, when about to be punished, cries out, "I did not do it, it was some one else," he longed to finally cast all the suspicion upon Phil Raynor, and so protect himself for ever. But his plans were not ripe yet. He had set his heart upon Pauline, and he could not give her up; he could not relinquish the power over her which his knowledge of Phil's delusion gave him. Yet if danger seriously threatened his own neck he was prepared even to abandon her.

CHAPTER XII.

THE POACHERS PUT TWO AND TWO TOGETHER, BUT CANNOT MAKE FOUR—THE MURDERER RESTLESS—THAT GUN AGAIN.

"It do seem a bit queer, Job, and I can't say as I quite follers yer, but it strikes me as we've fell upon a mystery."

The speaker was the rascal Nicky, his companion, Job Cassidy. They were sitting on a bank by the roadside, within sight of their favourite retreat, the "Bakers' Arms," and not a stone's throw from Hazel Wood.

"Let's start over again, Job. Let's begin at the beginning. You say as you was hoeing weeds up at the 'All when you 'ears a row going' on inside, and a fight; and you listens and you 'ears Mealy Markham says as he'd spent money wot he

didn't oughter, and he charges young Mr. Raynor with shooting Mr. Wilde?"

"Yes, that's it," said the slow-witted Job.

"And Mr. Raynor, he said he didn't do it; and yet he gave in and signed a hinvoice or summat what protected Mealy Markham?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's clear, Job, 'as young Mr. Wilde didn't shoot himself, ain't it? And it's clear some one else did. Therefore, who is it? I asks."

"It's 'im—Markham," said Job. I know it wasn't the young 'un."

"Werry well; we finds a gun hidden in the wood, and while we're looking at it the lorful owner comes along and tries to get it, and we 'as a tussle in the dark, and the gent leaves 'is necktie behind——."

"And his pin?" interjected Job; "and a bullet in my boot."

"Just so. And after that a cove comes to the 'Bakers' Arms,' wet, and out of breath, and we see he ain't got no necktie on. And that man was Mealy Markham."

"He was that."

"Therefore, my lud—as the bloke ses what argifies with the beak—the case is clear as kristal water. Mr. Mealy has bin doing somethink shady with that there gun as he was ashamed of."

"Shootin'," said Job.

"And it's very clear that one of these two 'as 'ad a 'and in it."

"It is that."

"'Therefore,' as the parson ses in his sermon, when the smell of his Sunday dinner is warfted across from the wickarage through the chancel winder, 'in konklusion.' Is there any reward? There ain't. Is there any good in saying anythink to the perlice? There ain't, but we've got to find that gun. It's left in the wood, I'll swear. If we can clap 'ands on that, Job, and stick to it, it strikes me as 'im what wants it will pay a tidy price for it."

"How much?"

"Fifty pun, I should say; and a bit more to keep our mouths shut, eh?"

"Nicky, you're a genius," said Job, after a pause of astonished admiration.

"I yam, Job, I know it; I yam," said Nicky, striking a melodramatic attitude. "I was born for better things," he cried, punching his chest, "much better things; better weskits and trowsis, and 'igh 'ats. I was born to drive a pony shay—my own, not no other bloke's. I was born for a slap-up gent, that's what I was. And the time mayn't be so far off, neither. Job, if we could spot the little game of these 'ere nobs, and make 'em shell out 'andsome—thick'uns and flimsies, no 'arf measures — there's no knowin' we mightn't both become blooming torffs enough to take a pub."

"Do you mean it, Nicky?"

"I does. Swelp me if my throat ain't a-gitting dry at the thought of it. Come along to the 'Arms,' Job. 'Ave a gargle on the strength of this 'ere consultation."

Job slowly rose to his feet and slouched along beside his friend.

As they neared the "Bakers' Arms" their attention was attracted by the comical figure of a youth in buttons and a tall hat strolling along in the centre of the road, with his lofty headgear tilted right on to his nose and his hands deep down in his trousers pockets. It was Jimmy from Dr. Chester's, and he appeared to be making for the "Bakers' Arms." The trio met at the entrance.

"Ahem!" coughed Nicky very loudly as Jimmy placed his hand on the door, "little boys not served in this bar. Hinfants in harms t'other door," which pleasantry was received by Jimmy with a stony stare.

By way of retaliation, however, Jimmy, with his elbows squared, pushed open the swing doors very wide, so that when released they swung back swiftly, just in time to close with a bang upon Nicky, narrowly escaping a collision with that worthy's nose.

"Think your're mighty clever, don't yer?" said Nicky, as he entered.

"I don't think," said Jimmy.

"No, I wouldn't if I was you; you might 'urt yerself. That little 'ead of yourn worn't made fer use, only fer hornament."

"That's more than yours was. A quart of ale, please, miss, and look sharp, there's a daisy," said Jimmy, tilting his hat on his nose, crossing his legs, and resting his folded arms on the edge of the counter. (He could only just reach up to it.)

"A qu—quart of ale!" exclaimed Nicky, in tones of exaggerated astonishment. "Give the kid a bucketful, miss, and let 'im swim in it."

The barmaid giggled a little, and Jimmy's equanimity was a trifle shaken.

"Look here," he exclaimed, inflating his chest and squaring up threateningly, "do you want to be chucked out?"

"*You* ch—chuck me out," cried Nicky, looking down at the lad's four-feet-nothing in feigned alarm. "Be keerful! be keerful! This 'ere friend of mine is Jem Smith the slogger, and he'll proteck me wiv 'is last drop o' blood."

"*Jem* Smith, eh," said Jimmy; "he looks a gem, don't he?"

Stolid Job, who had been looking on as amused as his gloomy nature would allow, now put his head round the angle of the bar and informed the young gentleman that "he didn't want any of his sauce."

"And now a threepenny cigar, Daisy, please," said Jimmy, as the fat barmaid brought him a tankard of ale as big as his head.

"Naughty! naughty!" cried Nicky, "smoking at your time of life. I'll tell your ma. You'll be sick."

Jimmy bit off the stump of the cigar, and with an air of supreme contempt placed the weed in his mouth, where he supported its unwieldly length at an angle of defiance, while he searched in his trousers pocket for a match.

"Find them trousers tight, don't yer?" said Nicky.

No response.

"And them buttons on yer chest, are they sewed on strong?"

No response.

"'Cos I was thinkin' your mother might be afeer'd when you shove out your chest like that as you'd get 'em in your mouth and swaller 'em."

No reply, only a few defiant puffs from the big cigar.

"Going to stand anythink, youngster?" said Nicky, after a pause.

"Here, Daisy," said Jimmy, grandly, "kindly give the gentleman a bung to stop his mouth up."

"Bravo, Jimmy!" growled Job, who was thirsty, and tired of the banter.

"So your name's Jimmy, is it?" said Nicky, patronisingly, "and you know my friend Jem Smith, do you?"

"Yes, he knows me," grunted Job. "I've seed 'im down at Dr. Chester's many a time when I've took letters down to Miss Chester for Master Raynor—and a smart lad he is, too."

Under the influence of the ale and Job's flattery Jimmy melted a little.

"Come on, Jimmy, what are you going to stand?" asked Nicky again, in a tone of conciliation.

"A quart of old ale for me, Jimmy?" said Job, persuasively.

"Dash me if I won't join yer, Job," quoth Nicky, with an effort, as though some one had been persuading him not to.

"A quart of old ale for these persons," said Jimmy, planking down a half-sovereign.

Nicky bent over it in mock astonishment, and examined the coin as though it were some curious reptile.

"'Arf a sov.! Oh, I say, aren't we flush!"

"Yes, I've just come into money."

"No!"

"Yes, honour bright!" said Jimmy, bursting with confidential importance—and beer. "Ten pounds left to each of us servants by my poor master."

"That is nice. And 'ave yer got it with yer?"

"No, I ain't got it all yet. He won't give it me all at once."

"Who won't?"

"Markham, the lawyer who's got charge of everything."

"Oh, he won't, won't he? I suppose he don't part easy, does he?"

"No—stingy brute."

The two poachers exchanged a meaning look.

"She's a nice gal, ain't she, at your place—the daughter, I mean?" asked Nicky.

Jimmy buried his nose in his tankard to hide his emotion.

"Nice girl," continued Nicky; "she's goin' to marry Mr. Raynor, ain't she?"

"I dunno," spluttered Jimmy from the depths of his quart pot.

"I suppose he's a friend of hers, ain't he? I mean Mr. Markham."

"No, he ain't," snapped Jimmy, banging down his pot and ramming the wrong end of his cigar into his mouth. "She hates him, I believe."

"Oh, she does, does she?"

"Yes. He came yesterday when she was ill, and off her head with brain fever, and as she was trying to jump out of the window she saw him, and she shouted out 'Murderer! *Murderer!*'"

Nicky and his friend exchanged rapid glances.

"And you should just have seen his mug when I opened the door. It was as white as—well, as that almanac."

Nicky again made an elaborate grimace at his comrade, but Jimmy's sharp eyes observed it.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Got the toothache?"

"No, no, only got the jumps in my eyes. I'm orfen took like that. An' what did she call him murderer for?" asked Nicky, continuing his pumping operations.

"Blest if I know. Poor girl! she's awful bad, and he ain't been near her. I call it disgusting!"

"Who ain't been near her?"

"Why, Mr. Raynor, who's going to marry her. If he was here I'd punch his head."

Jimmy valiantly shook his fist, rammed his little top hat on his little fat head, and chewed his cigar savagely.

"I've got a note for him from Dr. Marsh, telling him to come down and see her at once, or he won't be responsible for the consequences."

"And what's that other letter sticking out of your pocket?"

"That's for him, too, from Mr. Markham."

"Well, my friend here happens to be doing a little weeding up at the 'All," said Nicky, "and you 'aving bin so good as to stand drinks, no doubt he'll be glad to take 'em up for you, won't you, Job?"

Job nodded assent.

Jimmy handed over the letters with alacrity.

"Take 'em," he said, loftily; "I'd rather not meet him. When my blood's up——"

"You're dangerous, I know," said Nicky, sympathetically. "I'm often taken that way myself. Here, Job, take care of the gentleman's letters. I'll come along of you and see you safe."

After another pot of old ale at Jimmy's expense, and sundry respectful farewells from Nicky, who addressed Jimmy as "Sir," much to the youth's delight, the two schemers left with the letters for Mr. Raynor.

As soon as convenient they left the high road, and climbing over a fence into an adjoining field, sat themselves under a hedge, and proceeded to examine the letters.

"Shall we open 'em, Job, or sha'n't we?"

"It ain't safe, and I can't read."

"But I ken. I'm a scholard, I am. I ken read anythink what's wrote plain."

Both letters, having been hastily written, were not securely sealed, and with the aid of a penknife were cleanly opened.

The first one was from Dr. Marsh :—

"Dear Raynor,—As you no doubt know Miss Chester is very ill—indeed dangerously ill. She is delirious and almost beyond control, calling for you incessantly. The death of her father, and some other shock of which I know nothing, have utterly prostrated her. I understand the mischief was done by a letter from you. It is not for me to tell you what you should do, but as her medical man I will not hold myself responsible for what may happen if you do not come to her.

"Yours sincerely,
"Edward Marsh."

"That ain't no good to us, Job; stick it down again," said Nicky, after he had spelled it out; "now for the other."

"Dear Raynor,—Marsh has insisted upon sending for you, but you shall not be admitted to the house. She is raving, thanks to your kind epistle, which has turned her brain, coming on top of her father's sudden death. Stir from your house, or make any attempt to communicate with her, and I

will open my mouth and tell all I know. If you don't wish to kill her, steer clear of the police and the hangman's rope.

"Your master,

"STEPHEN MARKHAM."

"P.S.—I am rather short of money. You had better send me a cheque for a couple of hundred."

"Ho! ho! he'll open his mouth, will he? And the young swell had better steer clear of the 'angman, had he?" quoth Nicky. "They're both on 'em in it, that's clear; and Mr. Mealey Markham is busy at the tapping business, bleeding the young squire. Job, we're on this 'ere lay. My palms is itching to touch a little of that couple o' 'undred."

"Look! look!" whispered Job, pointing suddenly across the field towards Hazel Wood, "there he is."

"Who?"

"Him—Markham, over there agin the tree as was struck, close by the wood—see?"

"Yes, I see." The two men watched the lawyer's movements with some curiosity. "It's the gun he's after, Job: he's looking for it. Quick round the field along by the hedge, so he don't see us while we ken see him. If he don't find it we will."

From a near point of observation they watched their prey. They saw the lawyer enter the wood at short intervals and emerge empty-handed each time.

"He can't find it, Job."

Again and again he penetrated the thicket, but apparently without success. At last, after a longer disappearance than usual, he emerged and walked swiftly away.

He had found the hidden gun, but guilty fear even now would not allow him to bring it out in the light of day. He had hidden it again, and carefully noted the spot this time, so that at dusk he might come again and carry it away.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ARTFUL MOVE—MARKHAM DEFIED—PHIL ADMINISTERS A FURIOUS CHASTISEMENT.

"QUEER, ain't it, Job, 'im walking away like that as though he'd settled his little bit of business satisfactory?" said Nobson, as he watched Markham walking swiftly away from the wood.

"Perhaps he's found it," ventured Job.

"And 'id it again, eh? We're used to these little dodges, ain't we, Job? Wait till he's gorn an' we'll see. Mark the place where he last come out, and we've got it."

"Over there by the two ash trees."

"Come along then, my 'arty. Lor, I ken already feel the yeller-boys trickling into my 'and."

"Halves, Nicky; halves."

"Wait till the chickens is 'atched, Job. Come along."

A short time after a couple of dark figures might have been seen in Hazel Wood, creeping on hands and knees in the shadows of the thicket, searching under every bush for the hidden gun.

Now and then they startled a hare or a pheasant, but they took no heed of them, they were going for higher game. Neither spoke for a time, and the only sound to be heard was the crackling of the boughs and the twittering of startled birds as they fluttered out of the bushes into the sunlight, protesting against the intruders.

A low whistle from Nicky, who had got separated from his companion, drew Job to a big bush, where he found his companion on all fours diving into the bracken.

"I've got it, Job," he cried, excitedly.

"Where?"

"Here," and he drew out the weapon from its hiding-place.

"Hide it again," whispered timid Job.

"At the other end of the wood, eh?"

"In the burrow where we keep our tackle."

"Right you are, Job. You slip up to the 'All with those

letters while I stow away the gun. My! won't he feel dizzy when he finds it's gorn agin!"

* * * * *

Job slouched up to the Hall with the letters, where he met Phil at the gate—not the old Phil, light of heart and free of step, but a dishevelled, gloomy man with drooping head and pallid cheeks.

He glanced at the letters handed to him by the shamefaced Job, and opened the one with the strange handwriting. The other he thrust into his pocket.

His eyes dilated as he read the doctor's warning letter. He crushed it in his hand and turned towards the stables with hurried step.

"Harness the dog-cart at once, do you hear?—instantly."

The new coachman nearly fell from his stool with astonishment at hearing himself addressed with such precision.

"Don't sit there staring; get the horse out, or I shall do it myself."

Phil's teeth were set; he was desperate. Markham or no Markham, Pauline was his life, and he must go to her. While the horse was being harnessed he took out the villain's letter, and his blood ran cold as he read it.

It did not, however, deter him, for in another minute he was spinning along towards Ilchester at a reckless pace, taking the reins himself, the coachman behind, and driving, as the coachman afterwards remarked to the groom, "as though he were driving to the devil."

At the Chesters' house he drew up so suddenly that the coachman was nearly unseated.

Throwing the reins on to the horse's back, he jumped down and strode through the gate to the house where Jimmy, always on the alert, threw the door wide open.

"How is Miss Pauline?" demanded Phil, with such asperity that even Jimmy was taken aback.

"Very bad."

"Is—Dr. Marsh here?"

"Not just at present, sir; but Mr. Markham is; he's just come in."

That hated man! At every turn he was confronted by him.

"What is he doing here?" Phil demanded, in such a tone

of sharp authority that Jimmy's jaw dropped in astonishment.

"He's here mostly now, looking after things under the will, I suppose. It ain't my business."

Phil strode into the house. There was the stillness of death about the place, and the clock in the hall ticked solemnly and slowly.

"Where is he?" asked Phil, in a lower tone, impressed with the stillness of the place.

"In here," said Jimmy, pushing open the door of the room in which Dr. Chester had died.

Phil stalked in with the air of a man bent upon an errand of dangerous import.

Markham, who was seated at the table, started to his feet as the boy closed the door behind the visitor. He saw a look upon Phil's face that he had seen once before, and he felt afraid to be alone with him.

"Did you not get my letter?" stammered Markham.

"Yes, and I have come in defiance of you. I have come to see my promised wife in her hour of need, and I will kill any man who stands in my way."

"Ah! killing is rather in your line, isn't it? How can you come here after the letter you wrote?"

"I did not write it."

"But you signed it; it is the same thing."

"And you dared to give her that cruel letter, when she was crushed with grief for her dead father?"

"How do you know that?"

"I can read it in your face, you vengeful, white-livered cur."

"Curb your tongue, young man. You know what I can do for you if I choose."

"Yes, you can hang me, and, by heaven, it would be preferable to this torture."

A gleam of satisfaction lurked in the lawyer's eyes at this confession.

"Ah! I have not done yet; I have more in store for you."

"You have not. My mind is made up. I will not endure more. When you extracted that letter from me on the plea that it was the wisest and best thing for my love to be quit of

a criminal, I believed you. But she is ill—dying, for all I know—and I have come to see her to revoke that letter and comfort her, and cursed be he who stands in my way!"

"You shall not see her! You shall not have her! She shall be my wife before she is yours! That is what I have in store for you," snarled Markham; "and if you stand in my way, you shall be put out of it—you know how; and if she refuses to be my wife, then I will tell her who shot young Wilde, and she shall sacrifice herself to save you from the gallows."

Phil stared aghast at the evil-eyed man as he spluttered out his sentences.

So astounded was he that he could hardly believe his own ears. He stood motionless, gazing at his persecutor with twitching hands.

Markham began to tremble, and edged round towards the door; but before he could reach it Phil had leapt upon him like a tiger, and fastened his strong hands upon the villain's throat.

"You evil-hearted reptile! you writhing worm!" he cried, as his fingers clenched in fury upon the struggling man. "If I have killed one man, I can kill another."

Down upon his knees at the first onslaught stumbled Markham, down again backward to the floor with a thud, as with head thrown back he crashed earthward.

"Help!" faintly gurgled the choking man.

"You venomous cur! I have your throat in my grip. I have your life at my fingers' ends; promise that I shall never see your face more, or I will strangle you where you lie. Promise!"

Phil's fingers were too tightly locked on the victim's throat to allow him to speak. The man only uttered a guttural sound, and clutched his assailant's wrists.

"Promise!" Phil cried, shaking him as a terrier does a rat. "But of what use is the promise of a thief? Why don't I kill you now? I will."

Tighter pressed his thumbs upon the purple skin; blood began to trickle from the creature's nostrils, and his eyes started from their sockets, but still the infuriated youth held on.

"Die! you worm, die! Why do your horrid eyes still stare

at me with life? I hate you! I know now what hate is. I know how you feel to me, but I can feel the same. I hate you; I am stronger than you; I have you in my grip; *and you shall die!*"

The helpless man relaxed his hold upon his assailant's wrists and clutched convulsively at the air. His body writhed beneath his opponent's knee once—twice—again! His legs curled under him, but vain his frantic efforts to shift the crushing weight from his body.

"Not dead yet! still staring at me with those horrid eyes! Why don't you die?"

Phil saw beneath him a black, distorted visage with rolling eyeballs. He loosened his right hand that he might savagely smite the loathsome face; the action gave the victim one moment's gasp of precious air—another minute's lease of life.

"I cannot kill him!" Phil almost shrieked in maniacal fury, loosening both his hands and smiting together with the two as though he would dash inward those rolling, glaring eyeballs.

The victim gasped and gulped the precious draughts of life snatched in the brief respite, and found again strength to writhe and toss.

To Phil everything seemed whirling round. The face before him was magnified like some horrible spectre in a nightmare.

Again his fingers locked upon his enemy's throat. Then he heard confused voices in his ears and a woman's piercing shriek, the sound of hurried footsteps on the stairs, and a voice calling plaintively for Dr. Marsh, a crash of glass in an upper room, followed by pattering feet on the stairs.

A minute later the door of the room was burst open, and Pauline, in her night-dress, with wild, dishevelled hair, stood before him.

"I knew it! I saw it!" she cried, clasping her hands upon her breast and staring distraught and mad.

"Kill him! kill him! Don't let me see the letter, only kill him, so that I shall never see it!"

The sweet, gentle Pauline seemed turned for the moment into an abetting fiend.

But the spell was broken. Phil released his victim and staggered to his feet. He realised that the ghost of Pauline's former self stood before him.

"Pauline!" he cried, plaintively, stepping over the prostrate man and advancing with outstretched hands, "is it you? Don't you know me?"

"Get away from me," she cried, shrinking against the wall; "you are a *murderer!* See, there is blood dripping from your hands. You think I don't know you, but I do. You killed my father."

"Pauline, Pauline!" he cried, "don't look at me like that. I am Phil—you know me, Phil?"

"You are not Phil. You are a murderer. Look!" she cried, pointing to the groaning man on the ground, "look! he is not dead yet. Get on with your work."

"Pauline!"

"Oh, come away, missy, do," cried the agonised voice of Martha in the background. "Oh, Mr. Phil, whatever have you been doing to Mr. Markham?"

"Pauline, don't you know me?"

"No, Mr. Phil, she doesn't know anybody but me; she's been like this two days. And she has been calling for you so, and to think that when you come she don't know you neither. It's pitiful. Oh, poor Mr. Markham. What have you done to him? How he's a-groaning."

"Pauline, I'm Phil; don't you remember?"

"I remember," she replied, nodding several times meaningly. "Where is Eddie?"

He advanced towards her, and she recoiled swiftly out of the door towards the staircase.

He came still nearer, begging her not to be afraid, and touched her.

She uttered a wild shriek and gave a look round that made his heart stand still. She seemed for one brief moment to recognise him and remember everything—her father's death, his own perfidy, and the cruel letter.

Then oblivion claimed her once more, and, staggering forward, she fell senseless in his arms, exhausted with the ravings of her madness.

The turning point in the fever had come. Her soul was balancing upon the wheel of life and death, and no man could say which way the wheel would turn.

Phil raised her in his arms and carried her to her room,

closely followed by Martha. Tenderly he laid her down, and Martha applied such restoratives as the circumstances demanded.

The poor girl had sunk at last beneath the conflicting emotions of her delirium. The tired brain, worn out with wild delusions from the land of dreams, collapsed beneath the strain. She lay in a half stupor, but occasionally her eyes opened and rested upon the face of Phil as he knelt beside the bed holding her thin, white hand in his.

She smiled feebly as she recognised him, and closed her eyes as if to sleep. Deep sighs escaped her lips at intervals, and the quivering form by degrees sank into peaceful rest.

"She's going to sleep at last," whispered Martha.

"Hush!" said Phil, softly, "you have awakened her again."

The big, sad eyes opened slowly and gazed upon Phil with a puzzled expression. The feeble white hand tightened upon his, drawing him closer. He bent over her tenderly and listened as she whispered—

"Phil, was it—was it a dream?"

"Yes, yes," he answered, smoothing back her tangled hair. "Go to sleep, Pauline; go to sleep."

She smiled feebly, and slowly drew his big, strong hand between her two weak palms, as though the sense of touch gave her comfort and assured her of the reality of his presence.

Then her eyes wandered from his face to the hand she held, and Phil followed her gaze.

Horror! his hand was smeared with blood!

She gave one dull look at the crimson stain, then another, and with a start of terror thrust it from her. She recoiled from him with a frightened cry, and in a sudden burst of strength raised herself to a sitting posture, threw up her arms, and fell back senseless on her pillow.

Blood! blood upon his hands! The brand of Cain in gaudy smears! He smote his forehead and cried aloud in pain. He remembered once more that he was an outcast from mankind; but a moment since he had sought again the life of a fellow-creature. One last lingering look at the still, fair form lying on the snow-white pillows, one farewell glance, and,

raising his hands above his head in wild despair, he turned and fled from the room.

* * * * *

Markham, who had been left below, struggled feebly to his feet, and at the same moment Dr. Marsh's key turned in the latch of the front door. The doctor entered the room and gazed upon the panting, dishevelled man in astonishment.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Look! look!" cried the tottering man, extending his hands and showing the stains of blood on them from contact with his cut lip and bleeding nostrils. It was a cry of fear; his face was ashen, and his eyes wildly distended.

"What have you been doing? How did this happen?" asked the young doctor, quietly, seeing with a professional eye that a physical encounter had undoubtedly caused the damage.

"That—that young blackguard Raynor has been attempting to murder me," gasped Markham. "He—he tried to strangle me, and I'm afraid I've r-ruptured a blood-vessel. See the blood from my mouth! For heaven's sake don't stand there so calmly! Do something—save me!" This as he fell half fainting with terror upon the couch.

"You coward!" thought Marsh, and he half smiled. "You have done nothing of the sort; your lip is cut from a blow, and a little blood flows from the nostrils from strain, that is all. How did it happen?"

"Are you quite sure?" whined Markham.

"Quite. A little cold water and a sponge will put you right in a few minutes."

"The young ruffian!" snarled Markham, as soon as his confidence was slightly restored, and the application of a sponge had stanched his scratches; "he shall suffer for this. He shall——"

A footstep on the stairs cut short any further threats. Phil, wild-eyed and despairing, entered the room. For a moment he did not seem to see anybody, but soon his gaze rested upon his white-faced torturer, whose physical courage sank at once in the presence of his enemy.

"I want to speak to this man alone," said Phil, turning to Dr. Marsh, and indicating Markham. His voice was strained

and hollow, and his eyes fixed with a strange look upon the lawyer.

"You appear to have already expressed yourself rather forcibly, Raynor," said Dr. Marsh. "Don't you think you had better postpone your interview, at least till you are out of this house?"

"No, it must be now—here. In any other place I should kill him—here I have already gone too far. He is safe with me now. Leave us alone."

"I don't wish to be left alone with you," said Markham.

"If I am not wanted, of course I shall not intrude. You seem agitated, Raynor. Has anything happened upstairs? She's not worse?"

He paused, and spoke with a sudden anxiety that was far from professional. The eyes of the two young men met. Phil knew of Marsh's past love for Pauline, and in this moment of trouble he felt no jealousy. Extending his hand, he motioned feebly to the door.

"Go to her. Leave me with this man."

Dr. Marsh hurried up to his patient, whilst Phil stood gazing silently at his persecutor, as though wondering what to do with him, the timid object of his scrutiny fidgeting awkwardly meanwhile beneath his searching glance.

"You needn't be afraid," said Phil, after a pause. "Listen to what I have to say. This is the last time you or I shall meet and part alive. If we meet again—you understand?"

"I presume you mean that your murderous proclivities will be too much for you—that, having murdered one man, you are anxious to murder another."

The door was slightly ajar, but neither of them noticed that it was gradually opened wider inch by inch by some one outside. The alert Jimmy, bursting with curiosity, and palpitating with excitement in the expectation of another physical encounter, was listening with his ear glued to the crack of the door.

"I mean," said Phil, resolutely, "that I have been a weak fool to suffer your persecution, but henceforth you continue it at peril of your life."

"Indeed."

"Your motives are mean and sordid. You want money and

you want revenge. Have you not had your fill? have you not glutted your hate?"

"No, I have not. Do you think I shall forget this day, any more than that other when you shot young Wilde?"

"I admit I did shoot him, but it was in moments of oblivion, when I was stupefied with drink, and I have paid dearly for it. If it were not for her lying at death's door above, I would go and give myself up to the police. As it is, I would spare her the shame and humiliation of being pointed at as the woman who lost her affianced lover upon the gallows. But as for you, I know you for a scoundrel—a blackmailer, forger, thief.

"You have no proofs."

"I have several. I have thought them out. If my hands were not tied I could land you in gaol to-morrow, in spite of the papers you forced me to sign. I can produce evidence incontestable that some of the documents you forged with reference to my estate were not signed by me at the dates stated in them. I can prove I was not in Ilchester on those dates—and, what is more, you do not know where I was."

Markham started. He had not calculated on this astuteness.

"You know nothing of legal matters," said the lawyer.

"I know something of common sense, and I know enough of law to assure you that a man who knows of murder, as you do, and uses that knowledge for his own purposes, and does not denounce the murderer, becomes an accessory after the fact, and liable to a heavy penalty.

"You cannot prove it."

"Don't be so sure. Denounce me to-morrow and see. I defy you to do it."

"No doubt. But it does not suit my purpose, you see. We are very brave to-day. You will alter your tone to-morrow."

"What I have said I mean. I know your game is money. You have nothing, you are nothing, and your boasted wealth and land speculations are all a sham. You have lived upon the money you have drained from my estates during the minority of my cousin who died. If the estates had never fallen into my hands you might have continued your peculation for many years to come. Now, being at the end of your tether, you mean to use your knowledge of my crime to get

money. How much do you want to leave me alone—to go right out of the country? Mention the sum, hundreds—or thousands if you like; make it what you please, for *both you and I leave England to-morrow.*"

Markham's fingers twitched nervously. For a moment the bait dangled before him aroused his cupidity. Besides, he had not bargained for such a show of resistance.

"What do you mean by 'leaving England'?" he asked, after a pause, during which the two men stood staring at each other like wrestlers, awaiting some chance opportunity for a sudden advantage.

"I mean that I am going right away from England, to start a new life. I know that I am not fit for that pure girl above; but if I am contamination, you are twice accursed."

"Do you think I can endure what I have at your hands," hissed Markham, and not care more for revenge than money? I do not love money for its own sake, but for what it brings—position, respect, and the power to pay off old scores. I have been despised and humiliated, slighted and scoffed at, in this town, and I have sworn to be equal with my enemies. This very day I have seen a man's home sold over his head, and cast him upon the streets, because when he was rich and I was poor he spurned me like a dog. I live for it. You know what I am, and the means by which I have triumphed. You see what the treatment I have received has made me, and you know me well enough to expect no mercy. Do you think the money you can offer me will wipe out the score I have against you? Why, my young friend, I can *take* from you as much money as you would care to give me. You forget that your rent roll is paid first to me, your appointed agent, before it reaches your hands."

"You demanded two hundred pounds of me to-day in your letter?"

"That is merely for a pressing claim."

"You scoundrel!"

"You may spare your epithets. You are at my mercy."

"I am not. I shall sell my estates and go abroad."

"You cannot; I hold the deeds."

"You do not. You left a packet of them at my house on the day after the inquest."

Markham's face fell, and plainly expressed his annoyance and astonishment.

"Yes, I administered to you a thrashing then as I have to-day, and as I will again. You were agitated and excited when you left the house, and you forgot the papers on the sideboard."

"They were of no value."

"I am not fool enough as to be put off with that. They were the title deeds."

Markham's endeavours to smother his vexation were unavailing.

"You know what to expect!" exclaimed Phil, passionately. "I swear by heaven and by hell if Pauline dies I will kill you. If she lives I defy you. Press me too far and I will denounce you as a thief, and give myself up as the murderer of my poor friend, peace be to his soul! Better she should know me as an irresponsible homicide than fall into the clutches of a cur like you. Better she should know me as a faithful, if an erring man, than believe me a traitor to my lover's vows. I was a fool not to tell her all. I see my course clear now. One thing only you have taught me—how to hate. You have contaminated me with your own slime. I feel the powers of love and hate are battling for me. If I lose my love I have my hate left, and having killed one man, I may as well be hanged for two. Now you know your danger."

The sound of footsteps on the stairs as Dr. Marsh descended silenced any reply Markham might have made.

"Gentlemen, I really must ask you to lower your voices," said the doctor, as he entered; "they penetrate into the sick room above. Our patient is in a precarious state. I fear she is sinking. If she has any relations within a reasonable distance they should be sent for."

"May God spare her!" Phil cried, "and save me from what must follow."

For a moment he gave way, but only for a moment. In another instant he was confronting Markham with such a look of passionate hate as made that none too courageous villain shift uneasily and mutter something about going.

"This is your doing, you callous blackguard!" he exclaimed between his clenched teeth, advancing threateningly to the lawyer.

"Raynor, be calm," said the quiet voice of Dr. Marsh, as he laid his hand gently upon Phil's arm. "Had you not better go upstairs?"

His anger left him: he understood the summons.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE BORDERLAND—PHIL SEEKS COUNSEL.

But Pauline did not die. For three days she hovered between life and death. Dr. Marsh was in constant attendance, and at intervals grave-looking specialists from London arrived. They gave up the case as hopeless, and firmly but politely informed the anxious physician that further attendance on their part was unnecessary. Nevertheless Marsh clung to hope, and at the end of the third day was able to report a distinct improvement.

Pauline was now in the care of a distant relation, a cousin of her father's, who had been summoned some days previously but could not arrive earlier. The good old lady's responsibility was merely nominal, for Martha so strongly resented her interference, and protested with so many tears that Miss Pauline had never been accustomed to anybody but her old nurse, that "Aunt Clarissa," as she was known to Pauline, could do little more than be a silent onlooker.

Phil was there by day and often during the night. Since his stormy interview with Markham his manner had distinctly changed towards his persecutor. A frigid calmness had settled upon him; his mind was made up; he would endure the persecution of the lawyer no longer. Markham, by virtue of his position as executor under the will of Dr. Chester, was in and out of the house frequently. Sometimes he and Phil would meet face to face. The look in the young man's eyes was disturbing. No more panic, no more doubting, no more wavering. Phil's course was clearly defined.

Much as the lawyer would have liked to ignore the threat as

idle bravado, something in that stony stare and those hard-set lips warned him there was danger ahead. He had miscalculated the weakness of his prey, and it was with no small relief that he heard from Dr. Marsh that Pauline would soon be out of danger.

As a drowning man clutches at the chance spar which constantly evades his grasp, so Phil watched the trembling life tossing on a sea of uncertainty. It was his only hope. The light of life had nearly gone out, and he dreaded the darkness.

Pauline signified by signs and whispers that she wished Phil to remain by her bedside as much as possible. When he was not there she was restless, but if she could lie still and hold his hand she was content, never questioning or referring to the past. Instinct told her that the hateful letter which had wrought the mischief between them counted as nothing. He loved her as of old. It was written in his face.

Yet he was torn with remorse, and dreaded the time when an explanation must be given. How could he explain that he was threatened with exposure and the gallows? How could he tell her that he was a murderer? Did she guess that his trouble was in some way connected with the death of Eddie Wilde? He sometimes thought she did. He noticed that as she lay weak and helpless on her pillow her eyes would be fixed upon him with a puzzled expression.

One day she drew his face down to hers and whispered—

"Phil, I—I think I understand."

"Understand what, Pauline?"

"That man—he has some power over you. You—you must confide in me when I get better."

She sank on her pillow exhausted with the effort.

He flushed scarlet. Did she suspect——?

At the other end of the room Dr. Marsh was quietly observing his patient. Softly as the words had been spoken, he had heard them. He, too, had realised that Markham, for whom he cherished a strong aversion, possessed some strange power over young Raynor. He wondered what it could be.

As soon as Phil could leave Pauline he hurried from the room, away from the observant eyes of Dr. Marsh. He went downstairs to the room below. Here Marsh found him an hour later sitting in deep thought.

"I presume you will be here again to-morrow, Raynor? Miss Chester is so much calmer when you are near that I consider your presence almost necessary to her safety."

"I ought not to be here at all, Marsh. I feel every time I come that I have no right to enter the door of the house," said Phil, passionately.

"Indeed."

"Yes, Marsh. I cannot explain to you why. My visits can only last till Pauline is out of danger—after that they must cease. I am going abroad."

"Abroad!" exclaimed Marsh, in astonishment.

"Yes—for the rest of my life."

"But Pauline!" exclaimed the young doctor in surprise. "Are you not engaged to Miss Chester?"

"I *was*," said Phil, "but *it must never be*. I must leave her."

The doctor's face flushed, and he caught his breath.

"Raynor, what does this mean?" he demanded, shortly. "I take the greatest interest in Miss Chester."

"Marsh, give me your hand. I know your feelings for Pauline, I know that you love her—have always loved her, that you once hoped to make her your wife, and that you were bitterly disappointed. I give her back to you, Marsh. Guard her, cherish her, comfort her, and perhaps in time she will repay you."

"Raynor, this is madness. What do you mean?"

"I mean, Marsh, that danger threatens her—through me, and I must go. I do not wish to leave her unprotected when I am gone."

The suddenness of the announcement for some moments deprived the doctor of the power of speech. At last he managed to stammer—

"Is Markham anything to do with this?"

"He is."

"I must know more of this, Raynor. This is not enough. You are right when you say I love Pauline. Heaven knows how deeply, how hopelessly. Yet I know that she does not love me. This resolve of yours will be a terrible blow to her, and I must know the reason. I demand to know.

"I cannot tell you, Marsh. Great heaven! how I wish I

could—how I long to tell some one! Marsh, Marsh, listen to me!" he cried, grasping his arm and speaking hoarsely. "If you had done something evil, committed some crime which would make you vile in the sight of men, and the thought of it was ever present with you, how would you act, loving Pauline as you do?"

"I cannot follow you."

"And if that crime were known to another—to a man such as Markham, who tortured you with the recollection of it, and blackmailed you to keep silence, what would you do?"

"As regards Pauline, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"I should tell her," said Marsh, simply.

"And suppose you could not tell her? Suppose every time you opened your lips to speak of it, your tongue clove to the roof of your mouth, and your conscience told you *she must not know.*"

"And why not? She *ought* to know," said Marsh, firmly.

"But suppose the crime were one of which the very knowledge would endanger her?"

"Good heavens! It is not murder you mean, surely? Ah! Eddie Wilde!"

In a flash the doctor's thoughts travelled back to the time when the town was full of rumours of the possibility of Phil being accused of the murder of his friend.

"Yet—the inquest—everything was simple and straightforward. How? Tell me, Raynor, tell me? Is it not because you are a murderer that you must abandon Pauline?"

"Alas! it is," cried Phil, burying his face in his hands.

"God have mercy upon you!" said Marsh, solemnly. "You do right to go. Tell me no more."

"Pity me, Marsh, pity me! You of all men know what a sacrifice I make, what agony I feel. Promise me, Marsh, that you will protect her! You will help me, Marsh?" cried Phil, almost piteously, as he extended his hand. But Marsh drew back coldly, and would not touch the murderer's hand.

"I will help *her!*" he said, earnestly and quietly.

"For pity's sake, Marsh, don't turn away from me like that," cried Phil, stung to the quick by the significant action. "I did not mean to kill him. I——"

"Hush," said Marsh, sharply. "I don't want to know; I don't want to hear. I know nothing. If you force me to listen I shall have no alternative—I must denounce you."

"Hear me, Marsh, I must speak. When you have heard you shall judge me—you shall decide for me what I ought to do."

"I warn you, Raynor—do not speak."

"I must. Listen."

And then, in a torrent of words madly, passionately spoken, he related everything, from the last scene of the dinner at the "Stag" down to the final encounter with his torturer in the room in which they were standing. When he had finished he flung himself into a chair and covered his face in his hands.

For a space there was silence—a long, painful silence.

"It is a strange story," said Marsh, breaking the silence, "a strange, sad story, and there is more in it than I pretend to comprehend. I can perfectly well understand the delicacy of your position. You are hemmed in all round. Which ever way you turn, misery and disaster stare you in the face."

"What is your decision, Marsh?"

"Your confession leaves me no option but to communicate what I know at once to the police, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless silence would benefit *her*. Why not stand your trial like a man?"

"I have longed to do so—oh, how I have longed! But I cannot endure that she should know, that she should be pointed at, and her good name dragged through the mire with mine."

"If she were able to decide, she would advise you to face the worst. Whilst this man lives he will give you no peace, and probably betray you in the end when you can no longer appease his avarice. Give yourself up, Raynor."

Phil hesitated and struggled within himself for a time. The moment for decisive action had come.

"I will, this very night," he cried.

This time Marsh extended his hand, and Phil grasped it fervently.

"I will go with you, Raynor," he said, with shaking voice, and just a suspicion of a gulp in his throat. "I will help you through the ordeal as far as I can."

"You will be gentle with her, Marsh," said Phil, with drooping head. "Break it to her kindly, and tell her that I should not have wavered for one moment if I had not wished to spare her the pain."

And then the poor fellow, overcome with emotion, did as most of us would have done under the circumstances—he burst into a flood of tears and wept like a woman. He believed that his dealings with the world were over, that he was entering a bondage whose end is death, leaving behind all that makes life worth living—youth, freedom, and love.

By degrees his calmness returned. He rose quietly, and looking inquiringly at Marsh, who was standing by much moved, asked—

"Shall we go now?"

"Yes, let us go to the station together."

CHAPTER XV.

HAUNTING FEAR—THE MURDERER BLACKMAILED—JIMMY IS PUMPED TO SOME ADVANTAGE.

During the early days of Pauline's illness the restless spirit of fear had so buffeted with the soul of Stephen Markham that his courage was at a very low ebb. The hidden gun became a greater terror than ever, and yet he could not easily summon up courage to fetch it away from the wood in broad daylight, when he might be observed, or visit the lonesome place again by night.

At last, however, he decided upon a visit by day.

* * * * *

"Beg yer pardon, sir, but was you a-lookin' for anythink as you've lost?"

It was the poacher Nobson who spoke. He stood confronting Markham in the high road just by Hazel Wood. In the background Job Cassidy was shuffling his feet and clenching his fists in an unpleasantly threatening manner.

"Lost anythink!" growled Job, contemptuously, sidling up very close to Markham; "maybe it wasn't 'is'n."

Markham went all colours at once. He had just been to the wood, only to discover that it had disappeared again. For a moment he had been almost disposed to attribute its disappearance to supernatural agency. A very panic of terror seized him; and, shouldering the gun he carried in his hands to avert suspicion and give a motive for visiting the wood, he hurried out on to the high road. He felt sick with fear—fear such as only cowards know. The reader may imagine the start he gave when, on emerging from the wood, he was suddenly confronted by two rough-looking men. One of them—Job Cassidy—he had seen before. He remembered his interview with him at the Hall, when Job's mystic reference to "murder, and them as knows of murder," so disturbed him.

He stood like a man at bay before these two loafers. Guilty fear was written on his face—it required no sharper eyes than those of Nicky to detect that. The lively poacher was not at a loss to follow up his advantage.

"Be quiet, Job, and don't flustrate the gent—can't yer see he's flabbergasted."

"What do you mean by this insolence?" asked Markham, with a feeble attempt at dignity; but his teeth chattered and his hands trembled.

"It ain't nothink of importance, sir; only we was a-thinkin' as 'ow your frequent visits to this 'ere wood was in search of somethink which you might 'ave lost, and——"

"Don't bandy no words, Nicky, give it 'im straight," growled Joe; "it ain't no good arguin' with a lawyer."

"Swelp me, Job, if you don't keep that clapper of yourn still while I'm speakin' to the gentleman, I'll bash you, I will, straight. Shut up, can't you, and 'ear what the gentleman's got to say."

The gentleman hadn't anything to say. His face was hard set, and his ferret eyes looked from one to the other in terrified confusion. Nobody spoke for a few moments.

"It ain't *a gun* as you was lookin' for, becos I see you're carryin' one now," said Nicky, suggestively.

"Oh, no, it ain't a gun," repeated Job, sarcastically, "and it ain't poachers. He's too bloomin' plucky to go after them

alone, he is. Shootin' in the dark is more in his line."

The poacher was only referring to the encounter with keepers in which Will Cassidy was captured, but Markham started so violently at this that he almost dropped his gun.

Nicky's sharp eyes saw what a homethrust Job had given.

"Be quiet, Job, and don't go remindin' 'im of unpleasant things, 'im wot's a respectable gent, and free and liberal with his money. Be more respectful."

Money! The terrified man grasped at the idea.

"I—I don't know what you want," he stammered; "if you want money for drink——"

"Yes, it's dry work, this 'ere watching and follerin'," said Job.

Markham fumbled in his pockets and produced a handful of silver.

"Not them," growled Job, "not them. Suvrins, Mealy Markham, suvrins. It's worth your while keepin' us quiet."

"I'm not going to be robbed in broad daylight," said Markham, with a feeble show of resistance, picking out two half-crowns. "I don't know what you're talking about. Here, my good fellow, take this and go away."

He dropped the coins into Job's outstretched hand, but in another moment they were flung back in the lawyer's face, leaving two scarlet spots where they struck his pallid skin.

"Be quiet, Job, won't yer, or I'll land yer. I will, swelp me," cried Nicky, hustling Job out of the way and stepping up to Markham. "Look 'ere, sir, it's like this 'ere; I ain't graspin' like my friend 'ere, he's a bit thick-'eaded. He knows what he means, but he can't express 'isself grammatical. I'm content to accept of you a ten-pun note to keep my mouth shut and 'is'n too, and if ever you warnt to buy *a nice neat double-barrelled at any time, a nice smart gun, what only a rich gent like yerself could afford,* I ken let you have the very thing for a hundred-pun note. It would be worth that to you, it would."

"A hundred pounds?" gasped Markham, falling into the trap.

"Make it a 'undred an' fifty, Nicky, it's worth that to 'im."

"I—I don't want any gun just now," stammered Markham.

"But somebody else might, you know," said the astute Nicky; then, turning to Job, "I wonder, Job, whether Inspector James down Ilchester would like to buy a nice gun?"

The veiled threat took effect.

"When will you bring me the—this gun?"

"When you shell out the flimsies."

"Very well, bring it up to my house this evening."

He was preparing to stride away.

"'Scuse me, guv'nor, but a fiver on account, jest to show there's no ill-feeling——"

Markham, who felt he was giving way utterly, hastily fumbled in his pocket-book and produced a bank note. He thrust it into Nicky's hand, and shouldering his gun hurried away, baffled and terrified.

"I think we scored that time, Job, eh?" said Nicky, as he surveyed the fast retreating figure of Markham striding away.

"We ain't scored yet, mate," said Job, doggedly, "we've still got the gun and he's got his money. There ain't no knowing but he may turn round on us when we go up with it, and say we stole it. Them lawyers is shifty as keepers."

"But didn't you notice his face when you let on about 'shootin' in the dark?'—it went all colours at once. You might 'a knocked him over with a feather, he was that took aback. Mark my words, Job, it was 'im and the young 'un what did that shootin' business between 'em."

"It warn't Master Raynor," said Job, doggedly. "It was *'im*, and he did it with that gun. If he didn't, what's he so anxious to hide it for?"

This argument seemed unanswerable. Nicky shifted his hat and scratched his head slowly and perplexedly.

"Blest if I can make 'ead or tail of it, Job, as the man said with the smooth threep'ny bit. There's a mystery about this 'ere which is beyond you nor me. But the more we find out, the better for us. We've got a fiver, and it strikes me as we can get the rest. Let's up to the 'Arms' and liquidate."

"Yes, and change that note," added Job, significantly; "halves, yer know."

"Halves?" ejaculated Nicky, in well simulated surprise. "'Halves?' Well, you ain't got no small cheek, you ain't.

After nearly spilin' the whole business with your temper, flyin' out at the man as you did, and after my delikit tact in screwin' it out of 'im, you 'as the owdacity to calmly demand 'halves.' 'Pon my word, you are a cool one, Job, you are!"

"No larks, Nicky, halves," said the burly Job, threateningly raising his clenched fist. He was in no amiable mood to-day.

"All right, Job, don't flustrate yourself," said Nicky, retreating judiciously and assuming a deeply injured tone. "I never said I wasn't going to give you your 'arf, did I? Perhaps you'd like me to tear it in two at once and give you your'n now?"

"None of your palaver, Nicky; come along to the 'Arms' and get it changed. I 'ope it's a good 'un."

"It's got writin' on the back," said Nicky, dubiously. "Somebody's name's wrote on it; I suppose it's all right."

* * * * *

"Well, I *am* surprised. This 'ere's a real pleasure to us, ain't it, Job?"

Nicky and his friend, having duly arrived at the "Bakers' Arms," stood upon the threshold whilst the former effusively greeted a diminutive person in a tall hat, who was busily engaged at the bar making love to the fat barmaid. It was Jimmy.

"We're real glad to see you lookin' so 'arty, Jimmy, that we are."

"Indeed," said Jimmy, loftily. "I don't know why my health should concern you. Daisy, another threepenny cigar, please."

"Be careful, miss; not one of them strong 'uns. We don't want to carry 'im 'ome on a shutter."

Jimmy cast a withering glance at the intruders, and turned his back.

"No, Jimmy, don't," cried Nicky, in mock distress; "the front view was bad enough, but the back view is wuss. My friend 'ere'll 'ave a fit—he's subject to fits."

"Leave the kid alone," growled Job. "Quart, miss, please."

Jimmy turned round so suddenly, in his hot indignation at being designated a kid before the fat barmaid, that he knocked over his glass of ale, and narrowly escaped the same fate himself.

"Be keerful, be keerful," said Nicky, warningly, "them trowsis of yourn is too tight to allow of them acrobatic tricks."

"Do you want me to kick you?" said Jimmy, with inflated chest and elbows squared.

"If you can reach up, young 'un, you may; but I warn yer them hornamental kickseys of your master's ain't manufactured to stand any strain."

"Here is your cigar, sir," said the plump barmaid, putting forward the box.

"Thank you, I'll take one too," said Nicky, reaching over and helping himself, "and my friend here, the Duke of Westminister, he'll take one. 'Ere y'are, Job. This 'ere young gent's recommendation is good enough for us, ain't it? What he smokes he knows, and it's sure to be good."

"Yes, I fancy I know a good cigar when I see it," said Jimmy.

"You do that," said Nicky, after a few puffs.

"Who is going to pay for these?" asked the barmaid.

"Now that's unkind of you, miss, askin' him delikit questions like that. Even if the young gent had wanted to stand treat (which no doubt he can't afford), you don't give 'im a chance. Don't be in a 'urry. The Bank of England ain't broke yet."

"No, but you are, I suppose," retorted Jimmy.

"You've hit it, Jimmy. Toss you who pays for the lot—beer an' all? Come on, don't be 'orty."

"Very well," said Jimmy, grandly.

"Spoke like a brick!—not as I ever come acrost a brick as spoke, but no matter. Where's my lucky penny? Oh, here we are."

He poised the coin on his finger and thumb.

"Now then."

"Tails!" cried Jimmy.

The coin fell neatly into the man's palm, and with an almost imperceptible movement of his thumb, a simple trick that any one can learn in five minutes, he *felt* the coin and discovered that the "head" was uppermost—that the coin when turned over on to the back of his other hand would show "tails." With a very simple but expert flourish he turned the coin over

and smacked it down on the back of his left hand, head upwards.

"Heads!" he cried; "you pay."

Jimmy paid stoically, Job growled approval of the beer, and his comrade grunted appreciation of the cigars, whilst the barmaid, relieved of the flattering attentions of the doctor's youth, busied herself among the glasses.

"Come into the tap-room, Jimmy," said Nicky, "and tell us 'ow the young lady is gettin' on what you told us about, 'er what's engaged to young Mr. Raynor. Last time we see you he was treatin' her shabby, wasn't that so?"

"He ain't fit for her," said Jimmy, in a solemn whisper. "I'm not going to tell you any more than that."

"No, don't you say any more 'an you want to. I ain't the man to interfere with anybody's secrets. 'Ave a drop more of our ale."

They were ensconced in the old-fashioned sanded tap-room, and after sundry compliments from Nicky, and a liberal supply of drink at Job's expense, including a pint of stout with a dash of gin in it, recommended as a good thing to keep cold out, Jimmy grew loquacious and confidential. On all matters connected with the late Mr. Chester's household he chattered freely, but at the mention of the name of Raynor or Markham he nodded his little head and winked his eye solemnly, as much as to say, "I know something, I do, but I mean to keep it to myself."

"Let him alone and he'll come out with it of his own accord," whispered Nicky to his companion.

"Don't you tell us, Jimmy, if you don't want to. You evidently know something ag'in Mr. Raynor. Keep it to yerself."

"It would be a bad—hic—thing f—f'r'im if I didn't!" hiccuped Jimmy, rolling his eyes horribly and propping himself up against Job in comic helplessness. He was rapidly succumbing to the effects of the drink.

"'Ave another pull, Jimmy, you're thirsty."

"I—hic—don't think I am. It 'ud be a bad thing f'r'im if anybody got to know what I know."

"Ah, so it would! so it would!"

"And it was all through drink. And it would be a bad

thing for—hic—Markham if anybody wash-t'-know, because Mr. Raynor said so."

"Another drink, Jimmy? 'Ere, Job, fetch some more for the gentleman."

"N—no, thank you—I am afraid I—don't feel as well as I—did."

"It's this 'ere changeable weather, Jimmy. Drink up."

"Yes, I s'pose—hic—it's the weather. It can't be the drink."

"Oh, no, it isn't the drink. It was Mr. Raynor's doing, I expect," this with a wink at Job.

"Yes, he's—murderer—or a manslaughterer or somethink. It's been on my mi—mind. Shot Mr. Wilde—I heard 'm say so—shot when he was drunk. Markham knew—knew—all—time. I was listening outside the door when they—hic—had a fight. I don't feel 't all well. I'm sure I'd be better in the fresh air."

"Yes, it is a bit close in here. Come along, old pal. You're the right sort, you are."

They led him out into the road, and Jimmy, in a fit of overpowering emotion, endeavoured to fling his arms round Job's neck, but as he could not possibly reach up so far, they propped him against the sign-post, and that did as well.

After many demonstrations of goodwill, including the borrowing of half-a-sovereign, they watched him totter away down the road very unsteadily, his little top-hat bobbing from side to side, and his thin legs performing extraordinary evolutions in their endeavour to maintain his body in an attitude of becoming dignity.

"I told you so, Job. It's the young 'un 'as done it, and the lawyer as knows," Nicky exclaimed, after watching the youth out of sight.

"I dunno so much," replied Job, clinging blindly to his intuitive conviction that Markham was the evildoer; "we shall see, mate, we shall see."

"Yes, but do you think we shall see that 'undred quid?"

"Yes. I'll take the gun up myself to-night, and I'll load it afore I go, too. And if he don't pay up——"

"Job!"

"I'll settle accounts for—brother Will."

"Job, don't be a fool."

CHAPTER XVI.

DANGER ALL ROUND—PHIL IN CUSTODY.

MARKHAM strode away from the importunate rascals who had blackmailed him, shaking with terror. To him it seemed that all must be discovered, since he had been watched, and the incriminating weapon seized. He neither stopped to consider how the gun could possibly incriminate him—he had a horror of it—nor to reason out how easy it was for poachers to have obtained possession of it by mere accident. He had been seriously disturbed by the veiled threats of Job Cassidy, by that encounter in the wood, and lastly by this attempt to extort money. He must get the gun at any cost—if the price asked had been two hundred he was ready to pay it. He felt the more terror of the danger that threatened him because it was the less defined.

But if he had been disturbed by this ominous incident, the reader may easily guess the effect of the news that awaited him at home.

"Mr. Raynor has given himself up for the murder of Mr. Wilde, sir."

The words were spoken breathlessly by one of his men-servants, who hurried to meet him at the gate.

"Given himself up!" gasped Markham. He wanted to ask when and where the man had heard it, but speech failed him for awhile.

"Yes, sir, it's all over the place. They say he went to the station last night with Dr. Marsh, and gave himself up. Inspector Jones has gone up to London by the morning train, and Mr. Raynor is in the lock-up."

"And what do people say?" asked Markham, hastily.

"Oh, they say they suspected it all along; but it seems to me, sir, that if they did, it's a wonder they didn't find it out before, and they're mighty excited about it."

"Go down the town, Tracey, and find out all you can. Keep your ears open and your mouth shut, and don't be long."

"Yes, sir."

What should he do? Should he fly while he was yet free?

But that was impossible. If there was any real danger, it was too late to escape now. Should he go down to the station boldly and make inquiries? But that required courage. He resolved to do nothing—merely await the development of events.

The more he examined the situation calmly during those anxious moments, the more secure his position appeared.

"Pshaw! why should I alarm myself? Nobody knows—nobody can know or find out. And what if I did listen to a murderer's confession, cannot I say that I did not for a moment believe it? And as for the money and the mortgages, have I not everything signed and sealed in perfect order? What can they prove against me? Nothing."

Thus he bolstered up his courage till the return of his man.

"Did you hear any reference to me at all?" he asked.

"No, sir. Leastways——"

"Well?"

"Somebody said they supposed you would act as his solicitor, and defend him."

"That will do, thank you. I will go and see for myself."

Feeling very ill at ease, he made his way to Dr. Chester's house, and asked to see Dr. Marsh.

The door was opened by Martha, Jimmy having arrived home "very unwell," being incapacitated for duty.

"What is this sad news I hear about Raynor?" asked Markham, as the young doctor entered the room.

"He has given himself up. You know what for."

"I? How should I know? I hear——"

"Never mind what you have heard. I also have heard the story of your robbery and persecution of that poor fellow, and allow me to tell you that Miss Pauline Chester's house is not the place for such as you. There is the door, you had better go before I kick you out."

"Indeed! And who are *you*, pray, to order me out of this house? As Mr. Chester's executor and representative, I engaged you to look after the practice. You are my paid servant. Kick *me* out indeed! I order *you* to leave this house, or I will have you turned out."

Marsh bit his lips with vexation. After all, Markham was legally his master.

"I refuse to recognise a felon as holding any authority over this house. I remain here to attend to my patient, Miss Chester, who knows nothing of what has happened. I refuse to go."

The young doctor turned on his heel and left the room.

"I had better brazen it out," thought Markham, when left alone. "I am safe enough. I have my proofs all ready. Who will believe the ravings of a confessed murderer? Unless they know—Pshaw! they cannot. I'll go straight to the police-station and see what they dare do. They will be careful how they tackle a lawyer."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE OUTLOOK GLOOMY—PHIL'S FRIENDS DO THEIR BEST—HANG THE MURDERER FIRST.

Inspector James was up in London at the Home Office, closeted with one of the high officials there, discussing the great sensation of Ilchester—the confession of Mr. Phil Raynor to the murder of his friend.

"The case seems simple and straightforward enough," the pompous official was saying. "I really cannot see why you need have come to us. Surely the ordinary course would have been the best one for you to pursue."

"Yes, sir, if it were an ordinary case," said the inspector; "but it did not seem to me to be so. About this man, sir—this accessory? The prisoner declares he has been robbed and persecuted by him."

"Has he any proofs?"

"So far as I can make out we only have his word for it."

"Then why trouble yourself about it? Who is the accessory, did you say?"

"A Mr. Markham—a prominent man in the place, a lawyer, and the prisoner's estate agent."

"An influential man?"

"Yes—but not popular."

"Leave him alone, then. Say nothing to your subordinates about the matter. It would be a most difficult charge to prove, a dangerous thing to attempt. Leave this side issue alone, and get the murderer hanged first. If anything comes out at the trial sufficient to implicate the agent, that will be time to take action. My advice to you is to get on with case in hand as quickly and as quietly as possible."

"Very well, sir. I will do as you advise. I leave town this evening."

* * * * *

So it happened that when Markham stalked into the police-station with his courage screwed up to hear the worst and brazen it out, the constables touched their hats to him as usual.

"Inspector James, sir? Gone to London, sir," answered one of them, in response to his inquiries. "Back this evening, sir, for certain. Sad affair this, sir?"

"Yes."

"I can hardly believe it, sir."

"For my part," said Markham, carefully choosing his words, "I am not altogether surprised. At the inquest I half suspected it, yet I could not charge him with so serious a crime from mere suspicion. I thought it best to hold my tongue lest I should seem uncharitable. I fear, too, that he was half aware of my suspicion, for of late he has developed a most unaccountable animosity towards me."

"Indeed, sir," said the constable, flattered by the lawyer's confidential manner. "To be sure, you can't be too careful in such matters."

This conversation was duly reported to Inspector James on his return, as Markham had intended it to be, and not without some effect.

"I have been rightly advised," thought the inspector; "it would be very difficult to tackle the lawyer. It is easier to hang an innocent man than one who is half guilty."

* * * * *

Late that night Dr. Marsh demanded an interview with the inspector.

"Well, inspector, are you going to arrest that scoundrel."

"No, sir. I am advised to take no action."

"Heavens! why not?"

"Those are my instructions, sir. The prisoner must go over to Yeovil to-morrow to appear before the magistrates, and be committed. Have you engaged any one to defend your friend, sir?"

"Yes, I have telegraphed to London for Mr. George Lewis, but he can't come. He has recommended a man I don't know, declaring him to be a very smart man."

"What name, sir?"

"Stanmore."

"Oh, I know him. You couldn't do better, next to Mr. George Lewis."

"But why aren't you going to arrest this rascal Markham?"

My instructions are to wait until after the trial.

"It is monstrous," exclaimed Marsh, hotly.

"May be—may not. You never know. But we shall keep our eyes on him nevertheless."

"Ah! you will have him shadowed?"

"No, not exactly. I haven't anybody at hand to do that."

"I'll do it, or I'll get it done," said Marsh, abruptly. "I have instructions to spare no expense in bringing that man to justice. That is all Raynor seems to care about. He is quite indifferent to his own danger."

"Better get a man down from an agency. Stop, there's a man over at T—— who used to help me sometimes when I was there. He's an old London runner, and a 'cute chap; he'll be glad of the job."

"Give me his name."

The name and address were written down.

"Thanks," said Marsh, abruptly, "I'll drive over to-night and fetch him."

"That's a smart, energetic young man, and means well," thought the inspector after his visitor had taken his leave. "Pity he don't confine himself to the main point and try and save his friend. It'll take a lot of saving, too, from what I can see. Two friends; one gets shot; a girl in the case; prisoner says he was drunk. Ah, drunk! That'll take some swallowing, too, I reckon, considering he was never seen to be drunk in his life. They were seen quarrelling a short time before, too. Humph! Carter!"—this to a constable in the outer office—

"I want you to run down to the 'Stag' and get the name of every person who was present at the dinner on the night of that affair."

"Night of the murder, sir?"

"Not so fast, young man. It isn't a murder yet. Don't let me hear you talking of murder—*alleged* murder if you please."

"Very well, sir."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARKHAM PAYS A HUNDRED POUNDS FOR HIS GUN.

The five-pound note that Markham had given to the poachers proved to be a good one, as was evident from the freedom with which Job and his friend ordered drinks at the "Baker's Arms."

It was not long, however, before some of the gossips brought the news of Phil's surrender to the inn.

Nicky heard it with open-mouthed astonishment, Job with his usual stolidity.

"Told you so," whispered Nicky. "It was the young 'un as did it; see, he's bin and give himself up. What did I tell yer?"

Job only grunted. He could not deny the fact, so held his peace.

"What price that 'ere gun now, Job?"

"I'll git the money."

"Not you, Job."

"Yes, I will."

"Werry well, my 'arty. I leave it to you. We'll go up after dark; I'll wait outside to see as you don't drop any five-pun notes on the pathway, and see you safe 'ome."

When the evening was well advanced and it was quite dark, a surly, rough-looking man carrying a double-barrelled gun knocked at the front entrance of Mr. Markham's residence.

"A man will be here with a gun I left to be cleaned," Mark-

ham had told his servant. "When he arrives, show him into my study, I want to give him some further orders."

Accordingly, when Job arrived, he was ushered, cap in hand, into the lawyer's presence.

Markham was white with suppressed excitement, and nervous, yet he pretended to be busily writing. He glanced up as Job entered.

"Sit down, my man, for a moment, will you, I am busy," and he continued writing quietly, as though the gun had no interest for him compared with the engrossing nature of his present occupation. The servant retired and closed the door.

Job was no hand at polite fencing; this cool diplomacy confused and astonished him; and his liberal indulgence during the afternoon at the "Baker's Arms" had not helped to clear his head.

"I don't want to sit down, I want to come to business."

"You want to—I beg your pardon, I was just finishing a sentence—what did you observe?"

"I don't want no mouthin'! Come to business. I've brought the gun."

"So I see. Put it over there, will you."

"No, it don't go out of my hands till I'm paid for it, and paid 'andsome. You know that me and my pal wants payin' to keep our mouths shut."

"But, my good fellow, I rewarded you handsomely this morning. You ought to consider yourself lucky in not being handed over to the police."

"How about *you*, Mr. Mealy Markham?"

"I carelessly left my gun in Hazel Wood one afternoon, and in a fit of absence of mind came home without it. You find it, and now you want me to buy it."

"Yes, and for two hundred pounds."

"Two—it was one before. Since when has its value increased."

"Since he's give himself up."

"He—whom?"

"You know who I mean—Mr. Raynor."

"And what has that got to do with my gun, pray?"

"This 'ere gun," sad Job, tapping it and nodding meaningly, "is *the* gun."

"I'm really at a loss to understand you."

"P'r'aps you'll understand when I tell you it's loaded," cried Job, in a burst of rage, half raising the weapon and thrusting the muzzle almost into the lawyer's face.

Markham tried to appear calm, but bravery had no place in his constitution. He was very uncomfortable.

"Are you goin' to pay, Mealy Markham, or do you want me to do what I swore I would when you hanged my brother Will?"

The terrified man could see that his visitor had been drinking heavily, and that his hand was none too steady.

"W—would you murder me, fellow?" he cried, with a feeble attempt at dignity.

"Yes, and swing for it, and glad to do it. For I've swore I'll see you hang afore I die, and I will, too."

"Put that thing down, man, and be reasonable. You asked a hundred pounds this morning, now you want two."

"Well, give me one, then."

He lowered the gun expectantly, waiting for some sign from the lawyer.

"Very well; very well. I will give you ten pounds this evening, and——"

"My mate's outside waitin'. A hundred or nothin', or we take this gun down to Inspector James and tell him where we found it, and *what I heerd pass atween you and the young squire the day after the inquest!*"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I warn't asleep when I was hoeing weeds outside the winder up at the 'All, and you was both shouting at one another."

Markham, try though he might, could not disguise his alarm at this announcement. He was completely staggered.

"And what's more, I know who shot Mr. Wilde, *and so do you!*"

"Everybody knows by this time. The murderer has confessed."

"Maybe, maybe. There's things I don't understand. If he has, you've made 'im, and he's bin a friend to me, and you ain't. It's wrote in your face who did it. *It was you as shot young Mr. Wilde, and with this 'ere gun.*"

Job craned his head forward and tapped the gun significantly, nodding sagely at the lawyer meanwhile, as though to impress him with the reliability of his statement. He grinned in drunken self-satisfaction, glancing from the gun to its owner, and back again to the gun.

"Are you goin' to pay?" he asked more quietly.

"Give me time," gasped Markham.

"No, Mealy Markham—I know your slippery ways. Now—here—now—d'ye hear?"

"How do I know, if I pay, you will keep your tongue still?"

"Try me and see, that's all you've got to do. Come on."

Markham, with trembling hands and hesitating fingers, took out the notes he had been prepared all along to pay.

"Where is your friend," he asked, in hollow tones.

"Outside."

"Will he keep his tongue still?"

"Trust 'im! You know very well that if you've got the gun and we ain't, anythink we like to say agin you ain't much good."

"Here's the money."

"And here's the gun," said Job, grasping the notes and handing over the gun at the same time.

"Now go," said the lawyer.

"Good evenin', Mealy; maybe I'll see you hanged yet."

When he was gone Markham strode up and down the room cursing himself for a fool and bewailing his sorry plight.

CHAPTER XIX.

COMMITTED FOR TRIAL—PAULINE DOES NOT DESPAIR.

"COMMITTED for trial."

Phil Raynor dimly realised that he was being hurried out of court back to his cell. The first act of the drama was over and the rest gave promise of no hope.

Nothing else was to be expected after his confession.

Though it could not be used against him, it had pointed out the direction investigations must take.

"But the man Markham—isn't it possible to do something to bring the thief to justice?" Marsh asked his solicitor.

"My dear sir, what would be the good? Our duty is to save our man's life if we can. We must get up a case—a defence of some sort. What is the use of complicating the business? It can do the poor fellow no good. Dismiss him from your mind at once, my dear sir. I assure you it will be wasted energy. If your fraudulent solicitor had committed the murder, now, he might be of some—— Ah, James, how do you do? It is years since I saw you. Remember the Wilson case, eh? Good-day, Mr. Marsh. I have just time to get my train and not a moment to spare. Keep your eyes and ears open, and I will send a man down to help you."

Marsh, despondent and baffled, left the court-house to return to Ilchester.

"How can I tell her?" he groaned. "How can I tell her? It may kill her—yet she must know."

Pauline was now stronger and able to leave her room, but she was the very shadow of her former self—beautiful as ever, but very pale and worn. Her lustrous eyes had grown sad and her delicate hands whiter and thinner. She never asked after Phil now. Instinct told her that he did not wish to see her, or that something prevented him. True, she was very much astonished when, one morning, he did not appear at her bedside as usual. They told her, with awkward hesitation, that he had been called away on business suddenly, and would not be back for some time. But as the long, dull days of sickness crawled slowly by and he did not return, she grew silent, listless, and sad. Pondering over his strange behaviour, she came to the conclusion that there was something behind it all, something that would be set right one day. She would wait and hope.

When Dr. Marsh arrived home he sent for Martha.

"Tell your mistress, Martha, that I wish to speak to her alone on a matter of importance connected with Mr. Raynor. Mind, don't say anything yourself about Mr. Raynor. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir; but hadn't I better prepare her a little——"

"Say nothing."

Martha delivered her message to Pauline with painful stammering and hesitation. So marked was it that Pauline, who for days had heard no mention of Phil's name, trembled with alarm.

"What is it, Martha?—tell me," she exclaimed. "Something has happened."

"Dr. Marsh will tell you, miss, I—I mustn't," said Martha, helplessly, with just a suspicion of tears.

"Martha——"

"Here is Dr. Marsh, Miss."

As Marsh entered the room he saw her standing erect, expectant and agitated.

"How lovely she looks," he thought.

Martha quietly left the room, and made a pretence of closing the door behind her, but remained outside in readiness in case of need.

"What is it, doctor?" asked Pauline, in a strained voice. "You bring bad news. Tell me—tell me the worst—I can bear it."

"Miss Chester, I do indeed bring you bad news." Then to himself. "Can she bear it? Will the shock kill her? Shall I tell her all, or——"

"Why don't you speak? I know what you are thinking. I can bear it. Tell me! do not torture me with suspense!"

"My errand concerns Mr. Raynor."

"Yes, yes, something has happened to him. For some time there has been mystery and—but now you have come to tell me that—that he has gone for ever."

She was standing, drawn up to her full height, one hand still resting on the arm of the old-fashioned, high-backed chair in which she had been sitting propped up with cushions.

"Not gone for ever—not yet," answered the doctor.

"What do you mean?"

"Briefly this, Miss Chester. Your lover, whom we all know to have been a man of irreproachable character, in a moment of weakness committed an act which makes him a criminal, and—and he is now in the custody of the police. He has nobly given himself up and made a full confession."

"Go on."

She was wonderfully—terribly calm.

"His rashness may cost him his life."

"His life?"

"Perhaps."

"Then—what is his crime?"

"Murder."

Pauline reeled and swayed. Marsh, himself wrought up to an agonising pitch, rushed forward to support her. The weakness was only momentary. With wonderful courage she drew herself up again.

"And who has he—killed?" she asked, bringing out the words with an effort.

"Eddie Wild."

"Ah!"

In a flash came the explanation of everything. Phil's overwhelming grief after the inquest, his strange behaviour afterwards, his attempt to steel her heart against him by neglect and seeming indifference—all now had their meaning.

She heaved a great sigh of relief.

"I understand! I understand! It is a relief to me to know; oh, you cannot tell what a relief it is to me to know. But his life is in danger, you say. They will hang him, kill him, take him from me! Ah! horrible, horrible! Oh, why did he not tell me? Why have you all kept it from me? He is in danger, and I am doing nothing to save him. Where is my cloak?"

"Miss Chester, you are not going out; I forbid it. Everything that can be done, has been done."

"Let me go. I must not stand idle here!"

Excitement seemed to give her strength.

"It is useless. He is in Yeovil. He appeared before the justices to-day and has been committed for trial."

"Committed for trial! What does that mean?"

"It means that he must remain in prison until he can be brought up at the Assizes before a judge, which will be in about a week's time. In the meanwhile his lawyers will prepare his defence, though they say they can do little. His only plea is that he committed the act whilst maddened and stupefied with the drink forced upon him at the dinner at the "Stag," and that he found himself in the morning stretched out

in an open field beside the dead body of his friend, who was shot in the head. At the inquest he intended to give himself up, but the strange entries in the diary pointing so conclusively, as everybody thought, to suicide, tempted him to hold his tongue and escape. Markham, however, appears to have suspected the truth, and used his knowledge to taunt Phil and wring from him an admission of his guilt. Then Markham blackmailed him, and robbed him, and made his life a burden to him. Poor Raynor felt that under the circumstances he could never make you his wife, and he began to realise that life was not worth living. He decided to stand his trial like a man, and throw himself upon the mercy of a jury."

"But how do they know that Eddie did not after all commit suicide?"

"The lawyers say that is no good as a defence. The verdict at the inquest was given upon Phil's sworn testimony that he left his friend at the Hall gates, which was not true."

"I must go to him," moaned Pauline; "something must be done to save him."

"There is hope yet, Miss Chester. Be calm. A man may confess, but his confession cannot be used against him. The charge must be proved against him by the authorities, and it will be a difficult task. Two pieces of evidence are missing, the dead man's diary and the shot taken from the deceased. Nobody seems to know in whose possession they are."

Pauline remembered in a flash where they were, but with quick intelligence held her peace.

"Leave me alone," she cried, pitifully; "I want to think."

She sank back into her chair, and covered her face with her hands. Marsh for a moment thought she had fainted; but after hesitating a few seconds he stole softly from the room. Pauline Chester was praying to her God for help.

CHAPTER XX.

SENTENCED.

A MONTH has passed, and it is the evening of the first day of the Assizes. All day long the court has been crowded to

suffocation. Now the interest grows keener, the silence more profound; the trial is coming to an end.

In the dock stands Philip Raynor, charged with the murder of Edgar Wilde. His counsel, the finest in the land, is pleading in eloquent tones for the life of the prisoner—pleading a hopeless cause with all the zeal of an earnest, warm-hearted advocate. Every theory that could be brought forward has been tried and found wanting. He is now appealing to the humanity of the jury, and he is pleading for mercy.

Phil stands erect and motionless listening to the arguments of his advocate, feeling how hopeless is his case.

How intently they all listen, how they hang upon the lawyer's words, and how indifferent the judge seems to it all!

Pauline is there in spite of Phil's wishes to the contrary. At the brief, painful interviews between the lovers allowed by the prison authorities—moments of despairing grief—he had begged her not to be present lest she should unnerve him, but she had insisted upon coming, and had her way. By her side sat Dr. Marsh, and far back among the crowd, unnoticed and unrecognised, the murderer Markham looked on the scene. To do him justice, he had never really intended that matters should go so far. He was a half-hearted man all round. In spite of his brutal threats, genuine enough at the time of their utterance, he still retained some promptings of humanity. His venom was spent, and if he had dared—if it had been possible without danger to himself—he would have gladly done something to avert Phil's approaching doom.

It was now too late.

The advocate finishes his appeal, and, trembling with emotion, resumes his seat.

There is a hush of expectation as the judge takes up his notes and arranges them before him. He begins, in a calm, monotonous voice, his address to the jury. How cruelly impartial he seems, how callously he arranges all the damning evidence against the prisoner. To Pauline and Marsh and Phil's friends he appears to be biased against the unfortunate young man. Does he care one jot which way the verdict goes? Does he forget that a human life is in his hands, and a few incautious words from him will weigh down the side of the

scale where grim Death is poised in the balance against young Life?

The judge's hand is trembling convulsively, though you cannot see it from where you stand in the court. His face is always pale, but it is paler to-day than usual. That little break in his voice which occurs occasionally is not uncertainty of speech but nervousness. He is striving his utmost to do his duty, steeling his heart against sentiment, sifting what has been proved from what was sought to be proved, and preparing the jury for their final decision.

His last words are almost inaudible as he charges them to free their minds from bias, and bids them retire to consider their verdict.

The jury retire, and the silence for a time is broken by scuffling feet and the murmuring of the spectators as the jurymen file out.

Phil elects to remain in the dock, with Pauline sitting near, her head bowed in grief, her hands clasped in her lap.

The jury return in half an hour. The buzz of expectancy grows louder, but with the re-entry of the judge all is still, solemn, and terrible.

"Do you find the prisoner guilty of the charge preferred against him, or not guilty?

The foreman of the jury stands up amid breathless silence. Pauline gasps for breath; an iron hand seems to be wrenching at her heart—everything swims before her eyes.

"Guilty," comes the answer, and a murmur ran through the court. Phil bows his head—he has expected no other answer, yet he feels as though some one had dealt him a sickening blow. "But in view of the circumstances of the case we recommend the prisoner to mercy." All eyes are turned again to the judge.

He is calm—cruelly calm it seems, but his voice quavers slightly as he addresses a few words to the prisoner. He agrees with the finding of the jury; he says they have done their duty, and could have come to no other conclusion.

"Philip Raynor, have you anything to say?" he asks, with trembling voice, keeping his eyes turned away from Pauline, who sits right in front of him. The agony in her face unnerves him.

"Nothing, my lord," replies Phil, quietly.

The judge places his hand upon the black cap.

But there is suddenly a commotion at one end of the court and all eyes for a moment were turned in that direction. A burly, elderly man of the well-to-do farmer type forces his way forward into the middle of the court, leading by the arm a young man with fair hair and a very high collar. The youth seems overcome with nervousness and stumbles awkwardly as he follows his burly father.

"I have something to say, my lord," said the man, "or at least my son has."

Attention is directed to the sawney, overdressed young man, who seems very uncomfortable, and blushes to the roots of his hair. His eyes are red and bloodshot, as though from recent weeping.

"What is the nature of his statement?" asked the judge, not too favourably impressed by the appearance of the young man.

"He is my son, my lord," explains the worthy farmer, apologetically; "he was at the dinner at the 'Stag' on the night of the murder, my lord, and——"

"He wishes to give evidence?"

"Yes, my lord, I wish him to. It is on my conscience, my lord."

"Let him go into the witness-box."

There was a shuffling of feet and a low whispering among the spectators as the awkward young man stumbled up the step into the witness-box, dropping first his stick and then his hat, and arriving there more confused than ever.

"Well, what have you to say?"

The youth looked hopelessly at the Court, and made no answer, but catching his father's eye fixed sternly and threateningly upon him, he managed to stammer out—

"I—I was at the dinner at the 'Stag,' and——" then he commenced to blubber.

"Well, go on," said the judge, kindly.

"And we were all drinking rather freely, and I'm afraid I had too—that is, more than I ought, and—and I was very excited——"

"Well?"

"And I noticed that Mr.—I mean the prisoner—was not drinking as much as most of us, and—and I thought it would be good fun to make him drunk."

"Yes."

There was a painful pause, and the witness seemed to be choking down a lump in his throat.

"He—he was drinking champagne, and there were a lot of drinks about, and I poured him out a big glass and put it beside him, and he drank half of it, and—— "

"But what has that to do with the case?"

"I'm coming to it, my lord. When he had drunk half I—I thought it would be good fun, and without thinking what I was doing I filled up the glass from a bottle of *liqueur*, and put the tumbler in his hand, and he drank it down."

"Do you mean to say that you purposely gave the prisoner a vile, poisonous mixture like that?" thundered the judge; "enough to turn the strongest head—to poison him almost."

"I—I don't know, my lord. It was only in fun, and I never meant—— We were all shouting and drinking and excited, and I—I wasn't quite sober myself, and I thought it would be good fun. I never thought it would make him so mad drunk as he was after, and I'm very s—sorry, and I want to do all I can. I never thought he would go and commit m—murder after. It was all my fault."

"Why did he not say this before?" said the judge sharply to the witness's father.

"I only heard of it this morning, my lord. He has been very downhearted about something ever since this business became public, and getting worse and worse. He refused to say anything about the dinner at the 'Stag' until this morning, when I got it all out of him. I knew he was there, for he came home drunk that night. He's my son, my lord, I'm ashamed to say, and I wanted him to make a clean breast of it, but he was too great a coward, my lord."

"What did you do?"

"I gave him a sound thrashing, my lord."

The young man bowed his head in shame and wept silently.

"You have done well," said the judge. Then he turned to the witness. "Young man, you see the result of your cowardice and your folly. You have your father to thank for

bringing you here to save the prisoner's life—for you have saved it. You may stand down."

A murmur of approval and a sigh of relief went up from the lips of every one in the court. A joyful cry escaped Pauline. Poor girl! she imagined Phil was already pardoned. Marsh laid his hand upon her arm.

"Hush—wait," he said, gravely.

"Prisoner at the bar," said the judge, turning to Phil, "you stand charged with the murder of your friend Edgar Wilde. Your case is a hard one, but you have committed a deed for which the penalty is death. You have been found guilty of wilful murder while you were labouring under the influence of drink. Such cases are, alas! too frequent, and though a man under that baneful influence is clearly not responsible for his actions, yet the law holds that he is responsible for his *acts*, and must pay the penalty of his misdeeds. The law does not inquire into the circumstances which cause a criminal's drunkenness when he commits a crime, it merely punishes him for the crime. Yours is the terrible crime of murder. In the course of my career it has been my painful duty to pass the death sentence upon more than one man who has committed murder under the influence of drink forced upon him by well-meaning but injudicious friends, and I could have made no difference in your case. But the jury have recommended you to mercy, and I am disposed to be guided by that recommendation, but not by that alone. Evidence has been given that you are as a rule an abstemious and well-conducted gentleman, and the last witness has conclusively shown that you were practically drugged with a nauseating mixture which deprived you of self-control. Under the circumstances I cannot condemn you to suffer the extreme penalty of the law. The jury must reconsider their verdict, and decide whether this is not a case of manslaughter."

A half-stifled, hysterical cry of a woman rang through the silent court as Pauline fell forward insensible on her face upon the solicitors' table. She had broken down under the strain of excitement.

* * * * *

Once more the jury retired. This time with more alacrity, and once more they filed into court after a much shorter

absence. With breathless anxiety the assembled crowd awaited the verdict.

"Manslaughter!"

Phil's friends gave a sigh of relief, and turned their gaze upon the judge.

"Prisoner at the bar, the jury have taken the more merciful view of your case after hearing the evidence of the last witness, and find you guilty of the lesser crime of manslaughter. The sentence I have to pass upon you, therefore, is *seven years penal servitude*."

A mixed murmur of approval from some and astonishment from others arose in the court, with a few suppressed hisses and some slight applause intermingled.

Phil was hurried from the dock, half dazed, and scarcely realising his escape, but as he was led away between two stalwart constables he looked back at Pauline. She had recovered from her swoon during the absence of the jury, and had now risen to her feet, as if to follow her lover. But they hustled him onward swiftly, and a door closed behind him with a muffled clang. She sank back in her seat in dumb despair. She was told that *he was gone from her for seven years!*

See! the court is breaking up. The judge and his attendants are disappearing through the curtains at the back of the bench; the barristers are whispering and chatting as they gather up their papers, glancing furtively now and then at Pauline, who is now sobbing as if her heart would break.

At last the court is almost clear; but she still remains in the same position, until Marsh gently reminds her that they must go. He tips an official to show them out by a side door away from the gaping crowd, and soon Pauline finds herself being driven rapidly away.

* * * * *

Among the throng who crowded hurriedly out of the stuffy court were two figures familiar to the reader. They rubbed shoulders almost as they passed out, but neither saw the other. One was Markham, the other Job Cassidy.

Markham breathed a sigh of relief as he regained the open air.

"Seven years! Seven years!" he muttered. "What an escape! I am free from him for seven years."

Behind him at a reasonable distance walked a shadow—the detective employed by Marsh to dog the lawyer's footsteps.

Job Cassidy seemed very much depressed by what he had witnessed. It had reminded him painfully of another scene enacted in that same court-house not long before, when his twin brother was sentenced to death for shooting the keeper.

It was difficult to recognise Job in his present garb. In place of the ragged, unkempt costume he usually affected he now wore a brand new suit of clothes. But his features were bloated and sodden with drink, his eyes bloodshot, and his gait unsteady. The fifty pounds, his half of the hundred extracted from Markham, had done him no good, for beyond a small expenditure in new clothing, he had done little else but drink—drink as hard as he could.

To-day he was maudlin, and as his unsteady legs carried him towards the nearest public-house he went along muttering and weeping alternately.

"Poor young gent! poor young gent! Just where brother Will stood before they took 'im. Seven years! Well, it ain't as bad as 'anging; but that there Mealy ought to be in it as well. He was in it, he was. I'll tell that young gal when I see her. I can't keep it no longer."

Then he stopped in the middle of the road and shook his fist in the air, heedless of the amusement he was causing the passers by.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN PRISON.

With needless haste Phil was hustled out of the court. He was taken along gloomy passages, his head swimming as in a terrible nightmare. A warder seized him roughly, and a pair of handcuffs were fastened on him which fitted so tightly that they left marks on his wrists for days.

"Seven stretch and no more. You've had a lucky escape,

young man!" said the warder, as he fastened the "bracelets." "S'pose that pal of yours was put up to that lay about mixing the drinks by your solicitor? It fetched 'em; but you're in for a good spell anyhow. I have known some manslaughter cases where they didn't give more 'an six months."

With this comforting remark he hustled his prisoner off to join some others waiting for the police van.

Into a stuffy, foul-smelling compartment of the van he was thrust next, and the door slammed upon him. Soon the jolting of the van told him he was being borne away. Whither? To live in a prison among the vagabonds of the earth *for seven years!*

His first confusion over, he now had time to think. Before his eyes was the scene in court—the agonised face of Pauline—as she stood with outstretched arms as they hurried him from the place.

Would she wait for him for seven years?

After a time the jolting of the van stopped. A key rattled in the lock; he was dragged roughly out of the van by a warder, and up the steps of the prison. Here he was handed over with a warrant to the governor of the gaol, a kindly man, who eyed him pitifully, Phil thought.

"Gently there, Saunders, gently," said the governor, as the warder proceeded to release the handcuffs from the prisoner's swollen wrists. It was so late that every proceeding was being hurried through at breakneck speed. The warders were anxious to be off.

In the reception ward he was told to undress, and for a time was compelled to stand naked whilst a full description of him was entered in a book. Every mark upon his body was carefully noted, including—strange irony of Fate—a scar from an old wound on the neck, accidentally made with a fencing foil by Eddie Wilde. Next he was placed upon a weighing machine; and his height was also taken. Philip Raynor, and a full description of his personal appearance, then figured in the governor's list of rogues and vagabonds.

They provided him with a suit of convict clothes—not those which he was to wear during the greater portion of his retirement from the world, but somewhat similar garments. When dressed he was asked whether he would like a pint of cold

skilly (oatmeal) and a small brown loaf. He declined, for, needless to say, he was not in the mood for eating.

In another minute he was thrust into a small cell, the door was shut to with a clang, and locked, and he stood in pitch darkness, alone and lost to the world.

Feeling round the place in the darkness, his hand struck against a contrivance of wood—the plank bed.

A night on a plank bed is with one exception the most painful physical punishment to which the well-behaved convict of our day is subject. On the plank was a blanket and a wooden pillow.

He sank upon the rude bench exhausted, wondering with a nameless dread what the rest of the room was like, and what fresh horrors were in store for him. Gradually the sense of dread abated and a weariness overcame him, but not sleep. The tossing and turning, the efforts to keep warm, and the stiffness induced by the plank bed, made sleep impossible.

How gladly he welcomed the morning light creeping through the grating of his cell! He arose unrefreshed, with heavy head and aching limbs and leaden heart.

As the light began to glimmer through the tiny cell he was able to get a notion of its contents, and realised also that he was being watched.

Being watched! How many people understand how the watching system is conducted?

The door of every cell contains a grating, through which conversation is carried on between prisoner and warder. This grating can be shut and opened when necessary. Above the grating is the much dreaded spy-hole.

As Phil soon discovered, it is an unpleasant sensation to feel that a man may at any moment be looking at you and noting your actions without being seen.

The warders wore slippers covered with soft list, similar to those used by burglars. In these slippers they crawled silently up and down the corridors, spying here and there, and listening like watch-dogs.

In this place he was pent up for seven days, with the exception of a few hours for exercise in a circular yard with the other prisoners. How his soul revolted at the diabolical leers of his fellow-convicts! They seemed somehow to know

all about him, and regarded the "murderer" with some interest. Alone in his cell, madness seemed to be threatening him. His patience and fortitude were deserting him after only seven days, and he was to suffer for seven years.

Solitude and silence, within bare, whitewashed walls, with only a dim light filtering through barred windows!

The man who is naturally solitary, and who has led a sedentary life, finds it hard enough; but to the strong and vigorous youth who has spent half his life in the open, breathing the fresh air of the country, the silent system in prison is torture indeed.

The oakum which had been given him to pick kept him employed for awhile. He tried to fix his thoughts upon the hateful task and to think of nothing else—anything to prevent his mind dwelling on the awful prospect before him.

By and by he began to pace his cell backwards and forwards like an encaged tiger. His eyes burnt like hot coals, and his head throbbed as though it would burst.

He longed for air, space, and movement. One day he climbed up to his window and hung on to the bars in the hope of catching a glimpse of a green field.

"Now then, none of that," cried a hoarse voice behind him, and dropping down from the window he found himself roughly collared by a warder. "You won't get out that way, my fine fellow. We have a short way of settling little tricks of that sort. You must come before the governor. Now then, out you go," and the man caught him by the sleeve and hustled him out into the corridor.

Phil's blood was boiling.

"Take your hands off," he cried, angrily.

"Get along there, or——"

The sentence was unfinished. Phil, in hot anger, had turned upon the burly warder, and dealt him a sounding blow with the left, nearly knocking him down.

Before he half realised what he had done, Phil found himself suddenly seized by a couple of strong warders, who held his hands in a vice-like grip.

The half-blinded, maddened official who had been struck, as soon as he recovered from the first shock of the blow returned to the charge, and lunged out at the now defenceless fellow,

giving full vent to his mad fury, whilst the other warders looked on and laughed, holding their prisoner's hands.

"Give it him, Wicky," cried one; "if the governor won't deal with insubordinates properly we must do it ourselves, or some of us 'll be murdered one of these days.

Maddened with passion, the strong man showered several blows upon poor defenceless Phil, until he staggered between the cowards who were holding him.

"That's enough, Wicky," cried the one who had previously spoken, interfering; "I guess he won't trouble you again. Now then, young man, no shamming, no pretending you can't walk. None of your dodges."

With unceremonious haste he was dragged before the chief warder and to the governor's room.

"What's this?" said the governor, as he entered the room and surveyed the four panting men, two of them holding the half-stunned, half-fainting form of the young man.

"Insubordination of No. 73, sir," said the warder who had been first struck, at the same time staunching the blood that flowed from his lip. "Attacked me savagely from behind, sir, as I was leaving his cell."

"Attacked you from behind and cut your lip in front; how was that?"

"That was after, sir. It took three of us to overcome him."

"It is a very strange thing, Wicks," said the governor, "that every case of insubordination for the last week has come from your ward. I am certain it is not altogether the fault of the prisoners. Your manner of dealing with them must be at fault. You lack tact, or judgment, or humanity, or something. I won't have it. There must be fewer cases of this sort in your ward, or I shall have to order a strict inquiry into the matter. Take that man back to his cell. I shall not order any special punishment in this case. He seems to have been badly mauled. No. 73," he continued, addressing Phil, "I am sorry to see you brought before me so soon. Do not let it occur again. Let this be a warning to you."

"But he was trying to escape, sir," said the abashed and astonished warder.

"Escape—how?"

"Climbing up to his window, sir."

"To get a sight of a green field if possible—to get a glimpse of country. I had no thought of escape," said Phil.

"It is a lie, sir! He was trying to get out."

"That will do," said the governor, quickly. "No wrangling here, please. Take him back."

He was led gently enough from the governor's presence, but as soon as they were well out of earshot he was again hustled roughly, and when he arrived at his cell they thrust him in with a sudden jerk that threw him face downwards on to the hard floor with a crash, closing the cell door upon him with a sharp clang.

Infuriated beyond endurance at this, he struggled hurriedly to his feet and rushed for the closed door only to hear the key turned in the lock and find himself once more a solitary prisoner. He struck with his clenched hands upon the iron door and shrieked aloud in fury.

The warders paid no heed to his cries, but from a cell not far distant he heard an echoing shriek of some poor wretch, maddened and desperate like himself, who, reaching at last the end of all patience and reason, was tearing at the bars of his cell door, calling alternately upon God and Satan to deliver him from bondage. The heartrending cries of the fellow-sufferer, aroused by the contagion of another's fury, acted like magic upon Phil, reminding him that his own suffering was nothing compared with that of others who had perhaps been years in that home of despair.

He slunk away from the door and threw himself upon his bed, clenching his hands, holding himself in check lest he too should go mad—too soon.

CHAPTER XXII.

JOB CASSIDY TO THE RESCUE—TWO BULLETS AND THEIR STORY—HOPE AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

ONE morning some time after the trial, as Pauline was sitting despondent and wretched in her room, Martha entered rather abruptly.

"There's a strange man below wants to see you, miss, about Mr. Phil, he says it is, and he won't give any message. He says he must see you, miss, and I believe he's drunk."

"What kind of man, Martha?"

"A rough-looking labouring man, miss, who sometimes used to come with letters from Mr. Phil."

"Is Dr. Marsh in the house?"

"No, miss."

"Show him into the consulting room, Martha; I will see him there."

Martha seemed to have doubts of the advisability of admitting the drunken person, but did as she was told, and Job Cassidy, for it was he, was ushered into the late doctor's room.

He had not long to wait before Pauline entered, looking the ghost of her former self, pale and sorrow-stricken, but calm and queenly.

Job pulled off his hat, and twisted it round and round in his hands, stammering out a good-day. After that his self-possession left him entirely, and he stood dumb.

"You came to say something about Mr. Raynor?" said Pauline.

"Yes, miss."

"Do you come with a message from him?"

"No, miss."

"What is it, then?"

Job looked cautiously round as if to assure himself that nobody else was present, and stammered out—

"I've come about the other chap—Mealy Markham. It was 'im as did it, miss, or he was in it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's on my conscience, miss, though I'm paid not to open my mouth; but I must. When I seed you in the court a-crying, miss, begging your pardon, I couldn't keep it in no longer. I had a brother, miss, what was 'anged, and it was his doing! My name's Cassidy."

"I cannot understand you. What is it you wish to tell me?"

"Mr. Mealy Markham 'ad a 'and in that shootin' business for which Mr. Raynor got seven years, miss."

Pauline was puzzled.

"Do you mean that he was aware of it?"

"Yes, miss, and that *he did it.*"

It was some time before she realised to the full Job's statement, but when she did her eyes flashed.

"Do you mean to say that Mr. Raynor did not commit the crime of which he accused himself?"

"Yes, miss; but until I heered in court as the young gentleman didn't remember doin' it, and only woke up to find it done, and accused hisself, I didn't see things clear. I thought they both 'ad a 'and in it, miss, and I was paid to keep shut on the business."

"By whom? I cannot understand you."

Her quick intelligence noted an earnestness and evident sincerity in the man's manner. This was no drunken raving, but a message of faint hope.

"Well, miss, it's like this. My poor brother Will was 'anged for poachin', and I swore to be even with Mr. Markham, and I mean to, too. I don't like 'im, I don't.

"Yes, yes, but about the shooting?"

"Well, miss, young Mr. Raynor give me a job weedin' for many weeks up at the 'All, when nobody else didn't think me respectable cos my brother was 'anged, and one day I overheard Mealy Markham and Mr. Raynor quarrelling about the shootin' of Mr. Wilde, Mr. Markham accusing him and him not denyin' it. And soon after I found a fine gun hidden in Hazel Wood—a gentleman's gun, miss, not a poacher's—an' I ses to myself, 'The owner of this 'ere ain't up to no good.' I didn't move it; but me and my pal Nicky Nobson went to look at it one evening about dark, and while we was there the owner of the gun came along stealthy like, and we seed him pull the gun out from under the bush. My mate dashes after him in the dark and grabs hold of him by the necktie, and he turns round sharp and fires, and the shot, a nasty, ugly one—lodged in my boot. He got clear away, leaving his necktie behind him. From that necktie we found out it was Mr. Markham, and it was his gun. Well, he dursn't take the gun away out of the wood. He left it behind him agin, and after watchin' and seekin' we found it and hid it, and spotted him coming agin to find it, and told him if he wanted it we would find it for him for a hundred pounds; and we did, and he paid

us. I'm afraid it ain't done me no good, miss; I'm too fond of a drop of drink."

"But how do you connect this with Mr. Raynor?"

"Why, like this, miss. I ain't no scholar, and I ain't clever, but talkin' it over with my mate we come to the conclusion that Mealy Markham had bin doing something with that there gun as he was afraid of; and I couldn't believe as Mr. Raynor shot 'is friend, could you, miss?"

"No, I could not. I begin to see the drift of your statement. Go on! go on!" she cried, clasping her hands.

"My mate, he's cleverer than me; he says that Mealy Markham must have shot at the young gentleman when Mr. Raynor and Mr. Wilde were coming home from the 'Stag,' and Mr. Raynor bein' made so drunk woke up, and finding himself beside the dead, come to a wrong conclusion, and accused himself of what he didn't do."

"Yes, yes. I see—I understand."

"If you could show me the young gentleman's gun, miss, I might be able to help you. My mate says that Mr. Wilde was potted with a shot like this ere, miss, which lodged in my boot.

Job drew out from his waistcoat a small round shot.

"This ere," he said, turning it over in his grimy palm, "is the feller shot to the one which finished off Mr. Wilde, I'll swear, and what's more, it ain't the sort of shot Mr. Raynor ever had in his gun, for I've cleaned it for him afore now, and I know. And if so be as any one can remember the sort of shot that Mr. Wilde was took off with, and they was to look at this 'un they might be able to make a pretty good guess at the man as shot the young gent, miss."

Pauline glanced at the little piece of lead and shuddered. She remembered very well the fellow one to it.

"I keep it for luck, miss, added Job."

"Look into the little brass vase behind you," she cried, "the shot is there. I saw my father put it in that vase."

"Your father, miss?"

"Yes, my father was the doctor at the inquest. Don't you understand?"

Job clumsily emptied the contents of the little brass vessel into his hand, and picked out a dull-looking bullet. He placed

the vase and its contents upon the table and, with the air of an expert, compared the two pieces of lead.

"That's the feller to it," he said, after a moment's pause. "They're both the same bore. They came out of the same gun. If you can show me Mr. Raynor's gun, miss, I'll bet a level fiver it wouldn't take either of them shots. I know his gun. I've carried it for him afore now. It's a smaller bore. These came from Markham's gun, a Scotch 'un. If Mr. Phil had been shown this shot he would have known in a minute that he didn't do it."

Pauline, overcome with emotion, sank into a chair beside her.

"Heaven grant that you may be right! There seems to have been a hideous mistake," said Pauline. "Poor Phil! what agonies he has suffered. Mr. —— I don't know your name."

"Job Cassidy, miss."

"You must come again and tell all you have told me to Dr. Marsh. This man Markham has been swindling and robbing Mr. Raynor, and Dr. Marsh is doing his utmost to bring him to justice. He hopes to have him arrested very shortly."

It required very little persuasion to make Job promise to assist in unmasking Markham.

"He was made for the gallows, was Mealy Markham, and he'll swing there yet," he protested as he left the house. "I'll come back agin, miss, whenever you want me."

As soon as he had gone Pauline paced the room excitedly. This new revelation, coupled with her knowledge of Markham's swindles, supplied such a plausible solution of the whole dreadful business, that she could scarcely trust herself to dwell upon it for fear that when the cool brain of Dr. Marsh came to be brought to bear upon the subject the whole fabric might crumble and leave but a ruin of disappointed hopes.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PAULINE TAKES ACTION—MARKHAM IS SHADOWED.

"Lor, what a state the young missis is in!" exclaimed Jimmy, sometime after Job's mysterious visit. He was sitting

on the kitchen table dangling his legs watching Martha make the pastry. "She seems to have given up grieving, and has been ordering me about all the morning fetching paper and pens and posting letters and five telegrams, and getting newspapers, and Dr. Marsh has been giving me instructions to tell all the patients he's 'out.' Unperfessional, I call it. There's something up. He seems to be off his head, going about the house whistling and humming as though there was going to be a party. And who do you think one of the telegrams was to?"

"Lor, how should I know?" said Martha, plumping down a handful of dough.

"Mr. Stanmore, asking him to send down a detective at once," said Jimmy, in a solemn whisper.

"Lor! Ain't they done with that dreadful business yet?" said Martha. "Poor Miss Pauline! it'll be the death of her. I can't get her to eat anything; nothing will tempt her."

"I don't know so much about that," said Jimmy, "she eat up all the biscuits in the dining-room this morning, and she's been drinking sherry, and Dr. Marsh has been drinking whisky, and both of 'em are up there writing away sheet after sheet as though they were writing for a wager to see how many sheets they could cover in a given time. I even see Miss Pauline laugh once."

"Lor, something must have happened. There goes the bell, Jimmy."

"Another patient, I suppose, to be turned away," said Jimmy, loftily.

The caller was not a patient, but a rough-looking countryman, who was welcomed eagerly by Marsh, and shown into a side room. He was the man employed by Marsh to shadow Markham.

"Come in, Harris," he said, and then as soon as the door was shut, "What news?"

"I've followed the man Markham everywhere, sir. He was at the court yesterday, and this morning he has been going about the town buying a number of articles of wearing apparel. From appearances I should say he was getting everything ready to *bolt* if necessary."

"He mustn't do that, Harris. I have fresh information,

which puts a different complexion on the whole business. Raynor is innocent of the crime of which he has been convicted.

"Innocent?"

"Yes; Markham is the real culprit we believe, I cannot explain now, there is no time to lose. Markham has a double-barrelled gun of Scotch make up at his house, or had a short time ago. I want you to get possession of it at all costs. Beg, steal, or bribe the servants; do you understand? You shall be handsomely paid if you can get it. The whole thing rests upon the evidence of that gun. Do you think you can manage it?"

"I will do my best, sir."

"And beyond that I want you to go or send up to Mr. Raynor's house and demand in the name of the police all the guns in the place: then deliver them over to Inspector James."

"Very well, sir."

"In any case I want you to be here at nine o'clock to-night to meet a detective whom I expect from town."

The man departed to continue his shadowing of Markham. The net was fast closing around the unscrupulous villain, but they had not got him yet.

Later a detective arrived, and Pauline put the case before him.

"You do not seem to be able to give me much to go upon. Two bullets of the same bore; a gun hidden in a wood belonging to a rascally lawyer, which seems to have some connection with the two bullets. There may be other guns like it, and this man Markham may have other reasons for hiding his gun."

The speaker was Detective Inspector Bell, a short, burly-looking man, very different from the average detective of the story books. In breathless haste Pauline had recounted the events of the last few days, her interview with Job Cassidy, and the mystery of the bullets, and he had listened in stoic calm, carefully checking all enthusiasm.

"But you must admit that everything points to this man as the murderer?" asked Pauline.

"There is certainly sufficient to make it a matter of suspicion, but there is nothing to warrant an arrest."

"And must this scoundrel go free whilst my lover languishes a prisoner in gaol?" she demanded. "It is monstrous. He is innocent, and his suffering may kill him. Oh, can you not do something?"

"About this embezzlement charge—is anything being done in that matter?"

"Yes, Dr. Marsh and Mr. Stanmore are in communication with the police. But you are all so slow—you take such a time about everything."

"We dare not arrest people too hurriedly, Miss Chester, it would cause us endless trouble."

At this point the door of the room was burst open by Dr. Marsh, who entered hurriedly, bearing in his hand a light, single-barrelled gun.

"Look! look!" he cried, triumphantly, holding it aloft. "This is the gun Phil carried, the one he brought home with him. He could not possibly have shot the bullet from this gun. It is a different bore altogether."

"See, inspector," cried Pauline, excitedly, "how can they possibly detain him in the face of this? Oh, I must go to him at once and tell him."

"Pray be calm, madam," said the inspector, quietly. "You cannot gain access to him at this time of night. Even if you prove your case it must be some days before he is released. It may be months. It is just possible that a pardon may not be procurable until the real murderer is convicted. Where is this man Markham?"

Pauline looked to Dr. Marsh for a reply.

"Oh, he is not far off. I have a man watching him."

"And his gun—how do you propose to get that?"

"I have set the same man to obtain it by fair means or foul if it is still in existence."

"Do you think he will succeed?"

"I hope so."

"It would be well to have the gun, of course," said the inspector; "but, failing that, you have two men who can swear to finding it. They have probably examined it, and could tell us all we want to know."

"I expect the man here every minute. Perhaps that is he," he added, as a hurried knock was heard.

The man Harris was ushered in very much out of breath; it was some time before he could find utterance so exhausted was he with running.

"Markham!" he gasped at last.

"Well, what has happened?" asked the detective. "Has he gone?"

"No."

"Have you got the gun?" asked Marsh.

"No."

"Well, what is it?"

"He was getting ready to go—going about buying things—thought he might be going by night train—and——"

"Stop a minute and get your breath," said the detective.

"No—time to stop; go—go up, he wants you," pointing to Marsh, "wants a doctor!"

"Wants a doctor? Is he ill?"

"I was at the back of the house, talking to one of the servants I have made friends with, when his man rushes down, crying out for some one to fetch a doctor, and I volunteered."

"What is the matter with him?"

"Hurt his hand, the man said, an awful cut—can't stop the bleeding, and a sort of fit as well, so bad, he couldn't make them understand how he did it."

"We had better go up," said the inspector, turning to Marsh. "I will come up with you. For the present I am Dr. Bell, a friend of yours. It will be a good opportunity for me to see this man."

Dr. Marsh, Inspector Bell, and the man Harris, all hastened along the dark road round by Hazel Wood up to Markham's house. Harris waited outside, whilst Marsh and the detective unceremoniously entered.

"How is your master?" was Marsh's first question.

"Very bad, sir, we can't understand how it happened. This way, please."

They were ushered into a large study, where they found Markham stretched out upon a couch ghastly pale and bloodless, his eyes staring with terror.

"Always a coward," thought Dr. Marsh, as he surveyed him; "he is half dead with fright."

The prostrate man extended his bandaged hand, and the doctor commenced at once to unwind the handkerchief which had been hastily bound round the wound. During this operation Marsh noticed that the detective, who had moved round to the head of the couch so as to be out of sight, was making signs to him, pointing to something by the fireplace. It was the steel barrel of a gun broken in half, each piece terminating in a jagged point and a sharp razor-like edge. A significant glance passed between the two men. It was not lost upon Markham, but he was too concerned with the pain of his injury to pay much attention.

When the wound was unbound the doctor looked very grave. The patient's eyes were fixed greedily upon his face as though trying to read the doctor's thoughts.

"Can you speak?" asked Marsh, after a long pause.

Markham tried in vain to reply. Only a low, whining noise came from the stricken man.

"How on earth did you get a cut like this?"

Only another moan.

"It is very clear how it occurred," said the detective, speaking deliberately, and keeping his eyes on Markham's face. "He has been breaking up this gun here for some reason—this double-barrelled gun on the floor here. See, there, the bars of the grate are all distorted and twisted. The gun has been placed between them with the intention of breaking it to pieces, but the steel barrel snapped in his hand and cut it open. Is not that so?"

Markham nodded and moaned, his eyes fastened upon Marsh's face piteously.

"The cut is a very bad one; you must remain as quiet as possible," said the doctor, as he finished dressing the wound.

But Markham shook his head and pointed to the table, signing to them to bring him pencil and paper. They brought him both and he wrote on the paper: "*Tell me my fate. What has happened to me? I want to know the worst. I know that man there, he is Detective Bell.*"

"As you ask, I will tell you," said Marsh, solemnly. "Your fate is not the gallows, Markham, as it might have been, but worse—a lingering death from *slow starvation. You have lockjaw.*"

The wretched man fell back in despair. His worst enemies could wish him no more horrible death.

He turned his face to the wall and seemed to breathe hard through his clenched teeth; there was a kind of determination in his despair that showed plainly he knew the game was up. He took no further notice of the detective. Inspector Bell was carefully examining the broken gun-barrel, trying the razor-like edge with his finger, and meditating generally on the strange irony of fate. After a while Marsh drew him apart and they left the room together, sending in the manservant to attend to his master.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MARKHAM DOOMED—HE IS ANXIOUS TO MEET DEATH HALF WAY.

"From what has happened I should imagine that my work here is ended," said Detective Bell, as he left Markham's presence. "I don't think there is any need of the police in this case."

"No, I fear it is a case for the surgeons—a hopeless case, and a dreadful death."

"You must wring from him some confession, doctor, and that soon."

"Oh, there is plenty of time," said Marsh, with a shiver; "he will live some days, perhaps weeks, yet. I hate a case of this sort, it unnerves me. The man will practically starve to death before our eyes. Surgical aid can certainly prolong his life with great suffering for a short time, but it means death in the end."

"Stephen Markham will not die a death like that," said the detective. "He is a different sort of man. You must keep a sharp watch upon him and get him to confess as soon as possible. Without a confession I fear you will not be able to prove your friend's innocence. I have met criminals before, and the

look on that man's face when he heard his doom from your lips, and turned to the wall, told me as plainly as possible that *he had made up his mind to destroy himself.*"

"Poor wretch!" exclaimed Marsh.

"Keep an eye on him, and give him time to think over and realise that he is approaching his grave," said the detective. "He will be in a different frame of mind by the morning. I will go back to Miss Chester, you remain here."

"Very well."

After an hour or so Markham's servant came from the room, and was met by the doctor.

"How is your master now, Tracey?" Marsh asked.

"I think he seems better, sir. He's walking about just as usual, but he looks awful, sir. He's writing now."

"Writing!" he exclaimed, in a tone of alarm. He hurried swiftly and noiselessly to the study.

The door was locked!

Swiftly grasping the danger of the situation, Marsh lifted his foot and brought his heel to the lock with a tremendous thud, and the door flew open.

The whole thing was so sudden that the man in the room was taken by surprise.

The doctor rushed in to where Markham was sitting with his back to the door. On the desk before him lay a sheet of paper, with writing scrawled upon it, and in his hand a small revolver.

The wretched man turned his startled eyes upon the intruder and rose to his feet. Before he could realise what had happened Marsh had rushed upon him.

"Drop that thing!" he cried, as the dumb wretch, uttering a moan of anger, for he could not articulate words, turned and faced him, covering him with the revolver. "Drop that, I tell you!" cried the doctor, recoiling before the glittering weapon.

Markham uttered a groaning sound between his locked teeth, which plainly meant "Stand back!" and pointed to the desk. Marsh cast his eyes upon the writing there. It ran—

"I have nothing left but to wait for death to come to me. I prefer to meet it at once and escape torture. This is my own act. "STEPHEN MARKHAM."

Marsh stretched out his hand, and, taking up the paper, tore it to pieces as coolly and as calmly as if no deadly weapon were pointed at his head.

"No, Markham," he said, "you have more to write than that before you go. You have a duty towards another to perform."

Although he appeared to be engrossed in tearing up the paper in his hand, Marsh was really watching the armed man like a cat, calculating his opportunity to make a dash for the weapon.

Markham, astonished at the young doctor's coolness, had lowered his weapon slightly, and he, having torn up the sheet of paper into a handful of small pieces, made a movement forward as if to throw them into the fireplace, but changing their destination, suddenly flung them into Markham's face, at the same time springing forward and grasping the revolver. In a moment the deadly thing was wrested from his hand.

"Not yet, Markham," exclaimed Marsh, as he slipped the revolver into a pocket of his coat.

The poor wretch, denied the chance of escaping the awful death in store for him, threw up his hands in despair, and strove in vain to speak. But his teeth were hard clenched; he could not open his lips; he could hardly breathe. He wanted to say something, but failed in every attempt to articulate; only guttural sounds and a whining noise, like the cry of some dumb beast in pain, escaped him. Baffled in his attempt to speak, he gave way to frenzied rage, and tore at his mouth, but all to no avail, his jaws were tight locked as with iron bands, and every effort to speak became a terrible convulsion. With his long, bony fingers clutching at his hair, he rocked his body to and fro, moaning terribly, stamping and gasping like a man in a fit, until his eyes seemed starting out of his head. Then an attack of coughing seized him, and he fell to the ground, convulsed and writhing.

The doctor quickly threw his weight upon the prostrate man, stilled the writhing of his body, and assisted his respiration. By degrees the poor wretch subsided into exhausted repose and lay upon the floor on his back breathing heavily and moaning at every respiration.

"Markham, this won't do," said Marsh, kindly, as he knelt

beside him; "you mustn't give way like this. You must go to bed and rest. You'll suffocate yourself if you lose control over your breathing again. Come, don't you think that if I get you to bed and write out a full confession on behalf of the poor fellow who has done you no real harm, you might be able to sign it?"

The sufferer shook his head and struck aside the hand with which the doctor was considerately supporting his head.

Trembling and staggering, he struggled to his feet and attempted to walk from the room, but his strength failing, he dropped into the chair by the desk.

He wanted to say something, and a pen being at hand he took it up and wrote with trembling hand:—

"Do you think I am going to confess to save him? I am suffering all this through him. I mean to let him suffer for what I did. I——"

Then another choking fit seized him and he dropped the pen.

He allowed himself to be led to his bedroom and to bed. But Marsh instructed the attendants to keep a sharp watch upon the invalid, as he showed symptoms of insanity, and a tendency to self-destruction. He did not leave the house, but took off his coat and flung himself down upon a couch in an adjoining room.

He drew a rug loosely round him, and, after a while, slept soundly but lightly, like most doctors accustomed to being called out of bed at any hour of the night.

As the night wore on the watchers by the sick man's bedside gave way to sleep also. Not so the patient. He lay thinking, tormented by the horror of his coming death. He was desperate indeed now. His mind, unhinged by the trouble that had overtaken him, was bent upon suicide.

When Tracey, his manservant, whom Marsh had set to watch over him, nodded in his chair, the stricken man raised himself in bed and listened to the heavy breathing of the sleeper. He assured himself that the man was fast asleep, crept from the bed and stole like a cat into the study, where, to his surprise, he saw Marsh stretched on the couch, with his coat flung over a chair.

In the pocket of that coat was the weapon he wanted. His fingers itched to get at it. To his distorted reason it offered

release from the invisible iron hand that seemed to be clenched upon his jaw. He could not endure it longer; it would goad him to such a pitch of desperation that he must tear the flesh from his face. In that pocket was the medicine which would put an end to it all.

He crept up to the chair softly—little by little—going down on one knee, and feeling cautiously for the weapon, but keeping his eyes fixed upon the sleeper's face.

It was in the underneath pocket, he could feel by the hard lump in the lining, and he must turn the coat over to get at it. Still, with his starting eyes fixed upon the doctor, he turned the coat over, ever so softly, but not gently enough to avoid just the slightest rustling sound.

Marsh opened his eyes, wide awake in a moment, and met those of the startled man. Markham's distorted visage appeared as a horrible vision in a nightmare, but only for a moment. In another instant he was on his feet, grasping the wrist of the hand that was already upon the revolver.

"You shall not, Markham, I tell you," he cried, struggling with the baffled man, who was endeavouring to clutch the weapon.

Markham uttered a moan of rage—a gurgling, choking sound, and dropped upon his knees, Marsh still holding his wrists.

"As I have told you, Markham, you are not fit to die."

The poor wretch began to moan and supplicate, wringing his hands. He was begging in dumb despair to be handed the weapon of death, that he might put a bullet through his brain. It was like a suffering patient praying the doctor for a sleeping-draught to allay the pangs of torture.

"Get up, Markham, you are going mad. You shall not leave this world until you have confessed to the crime for which another is suffering. Nay, more, I will be as merciless as you. I will prolong your life and your suffering till you do confess. Every expedient known to surgery will be resorted to to protract your miserable life."

The poor wretch moaned and wrung his hands, and began to weep, kneeling before the avenger. He seemed to have grown ten years older, so haggard and worn was he; and now, as he knelt there weeping, he was an object of pity indeed—utterly broken, cowed, and submissive. He struggled to his

feet like an infirm old man, and extended his hands feebly towards the writing-table.

Marsh handed him a pen and put paper before him.

"That is better, Markham," he said, approvingly, "you are getting human at last. There is nothing like suffering. It finds out a man's heart for him and softens it in spite of himself."

With shaking hand the lawyer wrote—

"I confess that I shot young Wilde on the night of the dinner at the 'Stag' as he was seeing Raynor home. I hid the gun in Hazel Wood, and I charged Raynor with the crime. He is innocent. "PHILIP MARKHAM."

By this time the sleepy manservant, awakened by the sound of voices, entered the room, rubbing his eyes and making excuses for his carelessness.

"Here, Tracey," said Marsh, "come and witness this document."

Markham signed the paper and his hands dropped to his sides. He sat like one in a trance while Marsh and the manservant added their signatures.

"Come, Markham," said Marsh, more kindly, "back to bed again. You have done the right thing, and I will do my best for you. I will give you a sleeping-draught if you cannot sleep. That at least will be forgetfulness."

The evil in the repentant villain seemed for a moment to return and take possession of him. He made a grab for the paper he had signed as though he would destroy it, but Marsh snatched it away.

"No you don't, Markham, steady! You can never revoke that."

The angry man made a frantic attempt to utter a sound that seemed to be an oath, but a convulsion seized him and he gasped for breath. His throat seemed to be closing up. He tore at it with his hands and uttered savage, guttural cries. Worse and worse grew the convulsions until in a minute he was black in the face, and writhing on the floor at Marsh's feet, slowly suffocating.

The horrified servant stood helplessly by, frantically ap-

pealing to Marsh in the name of heaven to do something to save his master.

"Quick, quick! Hold his arms," cried Marsh. "Don't stand whining there. Can't you see he is suffocating? Help me to hold him still that he may draw breath."

The servant was too frightened to render any real assistance. The sufferer's staring eyes and slowly blackening face appalled and fascinated him with a terror that made him worse than useless.

In vain Marsh strove to still the patient's writhing and aid his respiration.

It was no use. Stephen Markham was at the end of his ill-spent life, dying like a poisoned dog.

By degrees the staring eye-balls stopped their quivering, the distorted features relaxed, the close-set jaw, so fast in life, now dropped in death; and all that remained of the murderer of Eddie Wilde lay a lifeless heap upon the floor.

CHAPTER XXV.

FREEDOM.

"A LADY to see No. 73," said a warder one morning, entering Phil's cell abruptly.

The oakum dropped from the captive's hands in astonishment.

"In the governor's room—this way," continued the warder, going ahead, leaving Phil to follow.

On their way they passed a couple of warders conducting a newly-arrived convict to his cell. The man touched his forelock in a cheeky way, and accosted Phil with "Morning, squire. 'Appy 'ome this, ain't it? I've been 'ere afore. It's one of the warmest prisons——"

"Pass along there," said the warder, pushing the speaker out of hearing.

It was our old acquaintance, Nicky Nobson, in for a long term for passing bad money.

Phil followed his guides, dazed and wondering.

The door of the room opened from the outside, and he was ushered in.

"Pauline!"

She started involuntarily on seeing a strange-looking man in coarse prison dress, but only for a moment. Recovering herself, she rushed forward with outstretched arms.

"Phil, Phil!" she cried, eagerly, "you are innocent!—innocent! and you will soon be free. I have come to tell you!"

Lost in wonderment, Phil stood gazing at her like a man in a dream.

"Innocent, and—how?" he murmured, staring, fascinated by her inexplicable enthusiasm.

"Markham is dead; and he has confessed that it was he who shot Eddie, and not you."

"Not me?"

"No, you are as innocent as I, Phil. Markham did it, and hid the gun in Hazel Wood. It was found by poachers, and he was watched by them, and they blackmailed him, and he paid them to keep quiet, but Cassidy, one of them, confessed to us, and we—Dr. Marsh I mean—got a detective down. He was about to have Markham arrested for embezzlement, when he met with an accident which has proved fatal. Marsh wrung from him a confession in writing which exonerates you, Phil. And now they must set you free."

"Free!" murmured Phil, still dazed and astonished at what he heard. Free? and innocent? Pauline, Pauline, is this true?" he cried, in agonised tones. "It is not a dream? I dreamed a dream like this last night, and awoke to find myself still in a felon's cell. But now you tell me I am innocent—that my hands are clear of the stain. Ah! I see it—I understand. I have been my own accuser all along."

He sank in a chair overcome with emotion, and Pauline knelt by his side. The burden was lifted at last.

"Phil, don't cry. It is nearly all over now. You make me cry too. We have happiness yet before us, Phil. The future is bright. There is much in store."

"Ay, happiness, innocence, and love," he murmured, as he took her face in his oakum-stained hands and pressed kisses on her lips. She was his again for ever.

Meanwhile Marsh was cooling his heels in an adjoining room, picturing the scene enacted there. Poor Marsh! he tried to feel glad, but could not. Few of us can when the woman we love is in the arms of another man. He sat twirling his hat impatiently, and, to keep his thoughts from unpleasant contemplation, occupied the endless moments—good fellow that he was!—in devising the most speedy means of accomplishing Phil's release. To this end he closely questioned the governor, and received an assurance from him that until Phil's release the prisoner should be relieved somewhat from the humiliating routine of the prison.

CHAPTER THE LAST.

THE CLOUDS SCATTERED.

THERE is little now to tell. But it will be well, perhaps, to take a glimpse at a scene outside Chesfield Hall some months later.

It is a bright winter's morning, and round the entrance to Phil's home is a motley crowd of men and women—chiefly men—some on horseback and many more on foot. They are evidently waiting for something.

Presently a string of carriages approaches the park gates. The horses and coachmen wear white favours, and the whole cavalcade is very smart. There is a rush for the gate. The first few carriages are stopped, and then allowed to proceed to the house, but there is a mad rush for the last one. Wild cheers rend the air as the crowd catch sight of handsome Phil Raynor and his bride.

"The horses out! the horses out!" is the cry that goes up; and a number of excited young men make a dash for the startled animals; others undo the traces.

Look into the crowd and you will see there all the faces that were round the board on that fatal night of the dinner at the "Stag!" No, not all. Marsh is not there, nor is the youth

who gave evidence at the trial. Marsh was called away—on business, he said after.

More cheering!

"Long live Phil Raynor!" they cry, and a voice calls for three cheers for Mrs. Raynor. Pauline, all blushes, hides her face behind her bouquet and tightens her grasp upon Phil's arm as three mighty cheers go up from three hundred throats. A few carnations and other flowers are flung into the carriage, and other more jocular spirits fling in handfuls of rice.

They drag the carriage up to the house in triumph, and Phil and his wife enter their home together, but not until Phil has been recalled and compelled to make a speech of thanks from an upper window to his friends and tenantry assembled below, is he allowed to return to Pauline, whom he takes in his arms and presses to his heart, showering kisses upon her lips, and whispering a message of happiness to come in the cloudless days of the future.

* * * * *

A few months after Phil's marriage Job Cassidy died of excessive drinking, despite the efforts of Phil and Marsh, now Phil's closest friend, to reclaim him from his evil ways.

Jimmy and Martha were both transferred to the Hall to serve their mistress in her new home; and, as the years went by, Martha's hair grew greyer and children clustered around Phil's hearth, who delighted in nothing better than to hear Martha recount, for the hundredth time (though strictly forbidden to mention the subject), the story of the great peril of their father's younger days, when he stood his trial, his own accuser, to answer for the crime of another man.

THE END.

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